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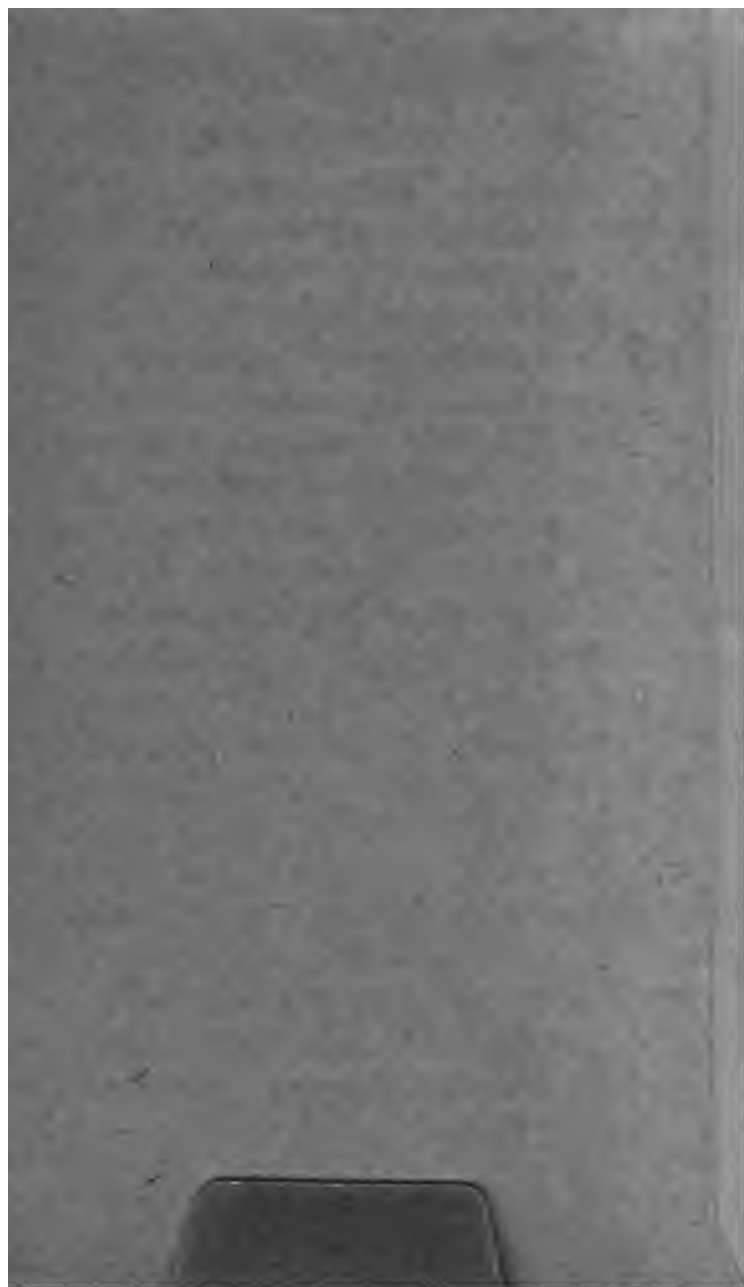
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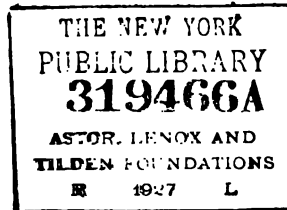
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IN BEAUTY," "OH, WHAT A PLAGUE IS LOVE!"

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A DAUGHTER OF THE FIELDS.

CHAPTER I.

A SKELETON.

THE big kitchen glowed warm as copper. There was a fire of coke in the open grate, with a log to the back of it. The walls were amber brown from the smoke of the half-dried wood; the floor had been newly reddened with ochre, and the tables, scrubbed with freestone, showed here and there a high light from a speck of talc. The tins were freshly polished, the dresser with all its gay crockery had had its face washed, and Bridget Cormack, maid-of-all-work, was free to enjoy the golden hour before it was time to get the mistress's tea.

"I'll be makin' a few crame cakes for them," she muttered to herself. "Not that the mistress'll know the differ; but Miss Meg's more delicate in the

appetite, as is but natural, seein' how the mistress rared her, God help her!"

She went into the little dim dairy, full of green light from the low window, and smelling sweetly, and brought out her jug of rich cream.

She was mixing it with the flour in a yellow earthenware basin, when the door was opened from the interior of the house, and a girl came into the kitchen.

"May I come and sit with you for a while, Bridget?" she asked. "The house is lonely with mother out all those hours."

"Ye're welcome as the flowers o' May, Miss Meg," said Bridget, warmly. "See here, now! Just pull the stool up by the fire while I'm bakin' the cakes. The very first wan that's done I'll give you for yourself."

"As you used to when I was a little girl," said Meg O'Donoghue, smiling faintly.

"You're little more than that to-day, darlin'," said the servant, with an affectionate glance at the slim young figure and graceful head, with its curls of vivid chestnut hair piled high upon it, "for all you're so well-grown and womanly-lookin'."

"Is mother always out so late?" the girl asked.

"Always—except when she's later; an' that'll be the night before the market, or in the lambin' saison, or when there's crops to be saved an' the weather looks like breakin'. Sure she's a terrible busy woman, altogether."

"And when she comes in she's so tired that she falls asleep the minute tea is over, and only wakes up to take her candle and drag herself to bed more asleep than awake. It doesn't seem right, Bridget, that her life should be all work and sleep. Even the horses roll about in the pastures and enjoy themselves after their day's work. But poor mother has no heart for enjoyment; she only wants sleep. How is it, Bridget, that she must work so hard?"

"Indeed, then," said Bridget, evasively, "she's the terrible great little woman, so she is; and she doesn't feel it, Miss Meg, not as you do for her. She's got into the way of it. She'd be lost widout it now, so she would."

"Has she no friends, Bridget?"

"She hasn't time for them, Miss Meg. Sure there's many a wan feels kindly towards her for the sake of ould times, an' the fine ould respected family

yez are. But Killisky's out o' the way, an' people got tired of comin' and findin' the mistress always out or busy. That's how it is, jewel."

"She wasn't always so, Bridget."

"No then, she wasn't, Miss Meg. She had the lightest foot an' the natest figure in the barony when she married your father. 'Twas a sight to see her dancin' at her own weddin'; she was like a rose on a bush playin' in the south wind. An' her eyes—you've got her eyes, Miss Meg—like the waters of a trout-strame stalin' along in the dark over little pebbles o' gold. There! There was never a bride like her in the country; nor won't be, till you stand up yerself, Miss Meg."

"And father," said the girl, dreamily—"father was handsome, too. Though he was thin and wasted when he was dying, I seemed to remember in him the gay young father of long ago, before mother put me to school in France, and kept me there all those years till he was dying."

"He was handsome, God forgive him!" said the old servant, grimly.

"Bridget," said the girl, turning on her a sudden flash of her golden eyes, "tell me—I am old enough

to know—why did mother leave me all those years at school? I never went home, like the other girls; I always wondered why. Now tell me.”

“Why don’t you ask herself, child?”

“Poor little mother! she has never time to tell me anything. But I must understand. I am not a child any longer. Why should she work, and I be brought up never to soil my fingers? It is not right, Bridget.”

“Whisht, jewel!” said Bridget. “She set her heart on you bein’ rared delicate. Look now, she’s like a man—an’ there are some such in the world—that’ll work till he drops, while the wife an’ daughters plays the pianny an’ wears satin to their backs; and he wouldn’t have it any other way, d’ye see?”

“I shouldn’t think much of the wife and daughters.”

“Your mother’s child wouldn’t. But whisper now; don’t go disappointin’ her. Make yerself happy, child, with your books an’ flowers, an’ bits o’ fancy-work an’ fal-lals. An’ make friends for yourself, honey. The mistress’ll never say no to you, though I’m afraid she’s rooted in the ould ways herself.”

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"I don't suppose I could make friends, Bridget—at least, not very many. I don't know their ways, and they don't know mine. The friends I care for are far away in France."

Her eyes grew wistful. She was thinking of how she and her friend, Germaine de Neuville, used to pace the sandy walks of the convent garden, and their long talks together. Germaine, high-born and without a *dot*, was to marry her cousin, M. St. Victor, a lieutenant of Chasseurs. It was a family arrangement, and Germaine had not dared to plead for the desire of her heart: that she might stay with the Sisters, and pray and teach, fast and keep vigil. They were making a portion of her exquisite trousseau at the orphanage attached to the convent. Germaine, who only desired the rough woollen and coarse linen of the nun, had put the things out of sight when she could; and when she could not, had looked upon them with an air of patient aversion.

Meg and the French girl had sworn eternal friendship. No; she was not likely to find anything like the fine, ascetic spirit, that had looked at her from her friend's plain, high-bred face, among the country maidens and matrons of her native place.

Dimly it came to her mind that her mother's plan had made her unsuited to the life she must lead. The convent of St. Cyprian, with its aristocratic pupils, had been an odd choice for the training-ground of the daughter of an Irish farmer.

"But you have not told me, Bridget, why mother sent me away," she said, breaking her musings; "and why she, who was so pretty, must stand the wind and weather in a man's rough coat, and do things for which a woman is not fitted."

"Never think little of her for it, Miss Meg," broke in Bridget, impetuously. "'Tis the brave little woman she is, and the ould rough frieze coat on her a finer thing thin silks and satins."

Meg gazed at her with wide eyes of surprise.

"There, child," went on Bridget, "don't mind me. I wasn't thinkin' you'd be despisin' her as some might; you're not your mother's daughter for that. Still, 'tis right you should know what she's done for you, Miss Meg; and if she won't tell you, I will. Do you remember anything of your father at all, Miss Meg?"

"I remember we were very fond of him, Dermot and I; he used to give us things when mother

refused us. Children notice such things, and we thought mother was hard with him and us. Once, it was Dermot's birthday, and father would give him punch at dinner, and mother snatched it from him, and Dermot cried, and father was angry. We were only children, and we thought mother harsh, and that she spoilt our pleasures."

"The Lord forgive yez, Miss Meg!"

"We were only children. I always loved mother the best; but Dermot thought there was no one like father, and would always do as he did."

"An' the Lord took Master Dermot innocent, praise be to His Name! He was his father over again. Ye wor a bit of a thing whin the mistress sent ye away, but sharp. Did ye never notice anything wrong wid the master, God rest him?"

The girl suddenly reddened all over her warmly tinted face, a dark flush of shame that for the moment blasted her beauty.

"I thought sometimes——" she began, hesitatingly.

The old servant nodded her head several times.

"Ye guessed, Miss Meg. I often thought ye might have, rememberin' the sharp little thing ye


wor. But what do childer know about such things? The habit grew on him, Miss Meg, God forgive him! —and at last it came to that, that we had to shut out the world, an' hide him from the eyes that would have looked scorn on him, an' keep him from the false friends that would have destroyed him sooner than he would himself. I held the house agin the people, Miss Meg; an' the mistress, that was so soft and purty, she took the man's part, an' went out an' managed the land herself. Else where would yez be but in the poorhouse this day? What good was her woman's finery an' fal-lals among the sheep an' cattle, an' agin the winter winds? So she put on the man's coat, an' to fair an' market she wint like any man o' them. There was many a wan to look crooked at her, an' say she was more like a man nor a woman. I wint through her thrials wid her, an' to me this day she's a hayro, Miss Meg —ay, all that."

The girl leant forward with parted lips and a curiously tragic and tense expression.

"Tell me more," she said, as the old servant paused.

"Ay, will I, lest you be ever tempted to despise

her man's coat an' her brogues, an' the hard, weather-beaten face of her. There was she fightin' the world with her soft hands—for, mind, it took time to harden them; an' at home what was there? No man, Miss Meg, for whin the drink enters in a man it brings the divil along with it. There he was, cryin' for drink wan hour, an' the next full of it, an' a ravin' madman. We never knew where he got it; it came down the chimbley or in through the kay-hole to him. There was many a one thought that we wor cruel to the poor master—God forgive thim their folly an' ignorance! Many's the night after she'd come in dead fagged, that she had to watch him all night to keep him from doin' himself harm. Ay, wid her life in her hands, for whin the fit was on him he was like a mad dog, an' his fury all agin her that was best to him. Tryin' to murder her he was now, an' the next minit he'd be cryin', wid his face in her lap, because the divil was out of him, an' he seein' clear the misfortune an' wreck an' ruin he'd brought on all about him. There was years of it, Miss Meg; enough to kill twenty women, for he was strong, an' whin we could keep the drink from him he came



to himself wonderful. An' through it all the mistress never despaired. She hid his shame, an' she took his work, an' to the last she kept hopin' the Lord 'ud give him back to her in his right mind."

"She loved him still?" said the girl, in an incredulous voice.

"In her heart, then, as to-day, she never had blame for him. Ye're only a child, an' don't know the ways of women at all, Miss Meg, though you're so clever."

"I should have hated him."

"Whisht, Miss Meg! don't use the word of your own father. I can forgive him myself now that he's gone. Och, you're lookin' pale, child!—maybe I oughtn't to have told you; but I couldn't bear to think you might ever look down on her."

"You were right to tell me, Bridget. She never would."

"She! . She'd cut her tongue out first. An' don't you go lettin' her know you know, Miss Meg. She couldn't bear blame to come near the memory of him that's gone. She thinks, God bless her! that we kept the saycret close; but sure, such things always creeps out."

"I suppose they do," said the girl, again flushing darkly.

"So now you see, darlin', how it is she works like a man, an' has no friends nor fal-lals, an' even gev up her child that she might be spared her own shame and sorrow."

"Yes," said the girl, slowly; "now I see."

CHAPTER II.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

MRS. O'DONOGHUE came in with a lagging step, her boots heavy with the clay from the wet fields, her coat sodden with the rain and the mire. She was a little body to bear the dragging weight, which had better suited one of her own stout farm labourers; but the spirit in her eyes was unquenched for all their fatigue.

"Why, Meg," she said, as her daughter came into the hall to meet her. "Meg! And to help me off with my coat, too! Never mind, child, I'm used to doing for myself."

"I know," said Meg, with a new air of determination. "You've been used to it too long; but now it is going to be different."

The indomitable woman stood to have her coat taken off with a bewildered look. When it was

hung up on its high nail, her daughter passed a caressing arm about her, and drew her with her into the parlour. She stood a head and shoulders over her little mother.

"How comfortable you have made it!" sighed the tired woman. "I should never have thought of a fire, myself, being the first of June as it is."

"And all the country black with rain all day," said the daughter, pushing her into a chair. "No; not your old trodden-down slippers; here is a pair I have never worn, soft and warm. They'd be too big for you, only you have so misused your feet. And here are dry stockings."

She knelt down and took one of her mother's feet into her hand with some such air of tenderness as that with which the mother might have held her own little feet some twenty years ago.

"Would you have worn the damp stockings if I had not been here to prevent it?" she asked.

"'Deed then, I might, dearie. Just as like as not I'd never have noticed the stockings were damp."

"Then I've come just in time," said the daughter, with affectionate grimness.

"Why," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, looking down at

the amber head, "'tis very pleasant, so it is, to have a little daughter to look after me. The very feel of you about the house, asthoreen, is comfortable, so it is. But you mustn't be spoiling your old mother. I never thought to have such a fine young lady putting on my slippers for me."

Something in the expression of her daughter's eyes, as they were lifted to her, startled her for a moment.

"Did you think," said the girl, almost bitterly, "that I was going to be a fine young lady while you were a working-woman?"

"You can't help it," said the mother, with simple admiration. "Miss Clare Fitzmaurice is not a finer young lady, nor half so pretty—though 'tis your mother says it,—nor Miss Mabel, that they say is going to marry the captain, though she's a pretty young lady, and wears the finest feathers of any pretty bird I ever saw."

"Foolish little mother," said the girl, lifting her bright head. "It is only that, like any other little goose, you think your gosling a swan."

"Maybe, maybe," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, looking brighter than her daughter had seen her since she had come home from her school a few weeks before.

"It may be that there's a dazzle on my eyes when I look at you, child; but I don't think I'm mistaken in being proud of my little girl, especially when she's not too fine for her poor, rough old mother."

"You never thought I would be, darling, did you?" asked the girl, imploringly.


"I don't think it now, anyhow."

"You never did!"

"Small blame to me if, when I saw you walking in to me like a young queen, I thought that, maybe, 'twas no place for you—that, maybe, the Counsellor was right when he was anxious about you going to St. Cyprian's."

"Here, drink your tea, little mother; I have put plenty of cream in it. And see the beautiful hot cakes Bridget has made for you! Put your feet on this footstool now, and tell me why Counsellor Fitzmaurice didn't like me going to St. Cyprian's."

"He thought it was terrible ambitious of me, though he wouldn't say it. When I made up my mind to send you to France, I spoke to the Counsellor about it, he being a pleasant little gentleman and always ready with advice. Besides, 'twas a strange country to me, and I didn't know from Adam



where to send you, or how to go about it. 'I know of one convent, Mrs. O'Donoghue,' he said, 'where my own mother was at school, but you wouldn't be thinking of it. 'Tis for French girls of family,' he said, 'and 'tis very expensive.' 'The O'Donoghues, Counsellor,' I said, 'are a fine old ancient race.' He laughed heartily then. 'I know what you're thinking of,' he said, 'that the O'Donoghues were kings in the country before the Fitzmaurices came in with Strongbow's rabble.' 'Deed no, then,' said I, 'for whatever ye were before ye came into it, ye've done nothing but what was high and honourable since ye came into it.' 'We have the Crusader's Hand anyhow, Mrs. O'Donoghue,' said he. 'Ay, indeed, ye have,' said I."

Mrs. O'Donoghue paused for breath, and the girl asked—

"The Crusader's Hand? I have forgotten it, mother."

"'Tis the glory of Killylea. The hand of Maurice Fitzmaurice, who died in Palestine because he wouldn't walk on the Cross. They struck the right hand off him first, and 'twas picked up by his servant, who, poor man, knew no better than to


pretend to believe in their Prophet. Neither blight nor decay came upon it, and when the day came, and he escaped, he brought home the Hand. They think a power of it; they'd rather lose anything in the world, I've heard say, than the Crusader's Hand. 'Tis the thing they're proudest of."

"I seem to remember it now. It is kept at the Castle."

"In a little room like a chapel. 'Tis in a little thing like a chapel itself, black and silver, with a purple veil about it. They say a touch of it is good for the ague."

"It must be fine to have memories like that in your family," said the girl, dreamily.

"There was many a hero of your own name, child, though there was none to keep their bones. But the Counsellor, when he had had his laugh out, as he always will, he said, 'Very well, Mrs. O'Donoghue, give the daughter the best chance you can. I don't think your girl will be the worse of it,' he said; 'and, besides'—he didn't laugh when he said it—'it is true that race will show. There is no reason why your girl shouldn't restore the ancient glories of the



O'Donoghues.' Indeed, he was real kind about it. He wrote to the Sisters and settled everything for me, and found some one to take charge of you on the way. Indeed, I'd no trouble at all. The Counsellor has a great wish for me," concluded Mrs. O'Donoghue, simply.

"They are our landlords, those people."

"Part of the land down about the river belongs to them. It was all we had when I married your father; but I've added a bit since then."

"Great little mother!"

"'Twas surprising how natural it came to me to work when I had to do it. I was a foolish bit of a thing till your father's—illness—threw it upon me. The Lord helped me in my need."

"You helped yourself, little mother."

"They say He helps them that help themselves. I met a deal of kindness, too. The Captain never pressed me when times were hard. Now he's proud of me for an improving tenant, and sets a deal of store by my opinion about the land. There was many a one did me a kind turn, too; it was like helping the widow almost."

"They were lonely years."

"I had *him*," said the widow, with unclouded eyes.

"And he was enough for you?" asked the girl, wonderingly.

"You won't ask it when you've a husband of your own, child. It went to my heart to part with my little girl; and then I lost my one little boy. But I never was one of the women that put the children first; ye weren't the same to me as the husband of my youth."

"I suppose not," said the girl.

Mrs. O'Donoghue had finished her tea, and drawn closer to the fire, basking in the unusual comfort.

"The place is different somehow," she said, looking about her. "It is brighter than I remember it for many a day. You've been busy about it, Meggy."

"I wondered if you'd notice. I've burnished up the old china and silver, and polished the glass of the cupboard doors. You've a lot of pretty things, mother."

"I used to be proud of them before I became a working man; since, I've had no time for them. Indeed, 'tis a real pleasant room now you've put your

hand over it. And the fire is pretty, dancing in all the old things; I've forgotten the feel of a fire almost."

"You shall have one every evening; it is never too hot for that. Your screen with the paper roses I've put away. You've no use for it."

"I'm not as active as I used to be," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, to whom garrulity was pleasant after years of silence; "I feel the rheumatism coming at me now and again. 'Tis the damp of the long grass, and the heavy dews when there's no rain. I've been out in all weathers."

"It is time some one took your place."

"So I've been told many a time," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, with half-shy laughter in her eyes.

Meg lifted inquiring eyes.

"There, don't mind me, child," said the mother.
"'Tis only the foolishness of men."

"I suppose you might have married again," said the daughter, slowly. "I never thought of that."

"Nor I, child. I was angry when the first one asked me; afterwards I was patient with them. They couldn't know that I was as much a wife in my heart as if your father yet lived. 'Twas always

the same story with them—that I had more than a woman could do. To hear them, 'twas all by way of good nature and charity.”

“It needn’t have been that,” said the girl, suddenly, touching with one caressing finger her mother’s weather-beaten face. “But how conceited of them! Are they always to be the strong sex? You have shown them what a woman could do, and there are other women who, at least, may attempt as much.”

Mrs. O’Donoghue looked up in alarm.

“I hope you haven’t been learning any of those new-fangled notions about women being as good as men.”

“Not in St. Cyprian’s, certainly,” said her daughter, laughing.

“I don’t hold with such things. The place of women is to stay at home, and be done for by men. A woman will find plenty for her hand to do in her house, and keep warm and comfortable.”

“Ah, little mother!”

“Yes, Meg, I know what you’re thinking. I’d have been glad enough to keep at home once. Now, I’m no good for a housekeeper; and the house was

lonesomer than the fields till you came to it. I had to be the man of the house, in a way."

"And what will you do if the rheumatism gets worse?"

Mrs. O'Donoghue looked at her daughter with a scared face.

"I've sometimes thought of it, but I've put the thought from me. There's no one I can trust. I don't know what would become of things if I couldn't go to the fields and the market. 'Tis hard not to have a son."

"You have a daughter."

"Not to make her like myself."

"Oh, hush, mother! I'm not fit to be named in the same day with you. Let *me* help you, mother."

The little woman's eye was fierce as she turned it on Meg.

"Say no more of it. It'll never be while I can put a foot under me. You help me by making me proud of you, and your fine, soft, delicate ways. When I let you go from me, I consoled myself with the thought that I was making a lady of you. Are you going to disappoint me after all those years?"

"I wouldn't disappoint you for worlds, mother ;

but it seems shame to me that I should lead the life of a fine lady, while you kill yourself with a man's work."

"I did it for you that you might be a lady. I felt repaid for all when I saw you looking about you that day at the railway station like a lady waiting for her carriage. I thought how proud your father would have been. If you could know the comfort it was to me to think of you at St. Cyprian's, you wouldn't talk such foolishness. There's enough for you to do in the house."

"Bridget can do everything better. I can only fiddle-faddle over dusting and such things."

"Do anything you like. Ask me for money for anything you want. Make friends; bring home pets—a little dog, now: Miss Clare has a real pretty black dog, that clipped and curled that he'd make you die of laughing. Make yourself happy, child, but never ask to become a man-woman like me."

"Very well, mother," said the girl, in a low voice, "I shall be as happy as I can—till—till you want me."

"When I am gone," said the mother, "you can sell the land. What does a woman want with it?"

CHAPTER III.

A TEA-PARTY.

MEG's home-coming had not passed unnoticed by the good people of Kilcolman. She was the subject of quite a disproportionate amount of the conversation at a little gathering of the neighbours which took place under the hospitable roof of Miss Maria Hevey, who, like Mrs. O'Donoghue, managed her own land and made it pay.


Miss Hevey was a big-boned, spare woman with a handsome, worn face and an honest masculine expression. She was the prince of good fellows, and could drive a horse or a bargain with any man in the country. She could have been married long ago if she had not chosen to rear her dead sister's big family. Now they were all dead, or married, or in America, and the spinster was once more alone in the world.

Miss Hevey did not find her unmarried lot without its compensations. Relieved of her vicarious motherhood, she fell back for relaxation on the sports of the country. She drove her dog-cart to a convenient meet of the hounds, and she was to be seen at all the races. Peter Hevey had been an ambitious man, and had somewhat scandalized the neighbours in old days by mounting his handsome daughter on a chestnut mare as handsome as herself. Later on, when she had had her house overflowing with children, she had given up riding; and now, as she said, she was too old to go back. But she knew the points of a horse as well as any man in the country, and it was delightful to watch the brightening of her face as she discussed horseflesh.

She was a thorough sportswoman—a great card-player, with a preference for high stakes and a rigorous game. But this preference she was quite ready to subordinate if she was in the company of poor players, in any sense of the word.

Beside Miss Hevey, in the place of honour, sat Miss Lennon, the curate's sister, a meek, faded, saintly little wisp of a woman, in limp black draperies.


Then there was Mrs. Pat Ryan, red-haired,



freckled, a good housekeeper, with a bad temper and a tongue to match. There was Mrs. Gleeson, a motherly, soft woman, with the complexion of a girl, and very white teeth. And there was Eliza Nolan, who had lived with her aunt in Dublin, and been a beauty and had got spoilt by admiration. But she had not known how to turn any of the lovers into a husband; and so, poor thing, had had to come back, and, to her mortification, take up her quarters over the general shop in Kilcolman, which was kept by her brother Andy, a grim bachelor.

The women were enjoying high tea and gossip. Presently they would be joined by their menfolk, and would adjourn to Miss Hevey's damply smelling drawing-room, where a table of polished mahogany was already set out with cards, little trays to hold the money, and a couple of branch candlesticks with candles ready to light.

"Well, we can't deny she's a credit to her upbringing," Miss Hevey was saying in her rich contralto voice. "She's as well set up as I was myself in my young days, and a deal rounder and fuller and more graceful than I ever was."



"I don't admire her figure," said Mrs. Pat Ryan, shortly. "I call her waist anything but genteel."

"I used to be told," said Eliza Nolan, with a melancholy simper, "that nineteen inches was the waist of a beauty. I could take in myself with two hands then."

"The girls of the present day are wiser," said Miss Hevey. "They don't twist their ribs and redden their noses, and go all day in torture to have a waist like a five-minutes' glass for boiling eggs."

"The dear knows," said Mrs. Gleeson, "Mrs. O'Donoghue must have spent a power of money on the daughter, the creature."

"If you're thinking of Tim or Larry, Mrs. Gleeson," said Miss Hevey, "take comfort. There's more where they came from."

"'Deed if they weren't only little boys, I might be having something in my head," said Mrs. Gleeson, smiling comfortably. "But here's Mrs. Pat with her fine, handsome boy, that'll be looking for a wife."

"It won't be Meg O'Donoghue!" snapped Mrs.



Ryan. "Tony'll have no girl reared above her station. Besides the mother's daft with her notions of her girl. Pat was speaking to Mrs. O'Donoghue, in the Butter Exchange, last Tuesday was a week. 'Ye'll be getting that little girl of yours married, ma'am?' he said to her, neighbourly like. 'Deed then, I'm not thinking about it, Mr. Ryan,' said she. 'Take my advice, then,' he said, 'and send for the match-maker. Girls are goods,' he says, 'that spoils in the keep. They're bad stores,' says he. She snapped at him real vicious. 'I won't have my little girl's match made,' she said. 'She'll choose for herself, or go without.' As if the old ways weren't good enough for her. And she that brazen, standing there dressed like any man of them."

"The poor woman didn't find her own marriage a bed of roses," said Miss Hevey.

"She spread it for herself," said Mrs. Ryan, with acerbity. "She didn't treat the man fair."

"She'd never have been Mrs. O'Donoghue," said Eliza Nolan, enigmatically, "if poor Con could but have had them he wanted. He married for spite, and it ended bad."

The women looked at each other. Eliza's vanity was well known.

"He married the pick of the county, then, for spite," said Miss Hevey, sharply.

"And what's the girl going to do now?" snapped Mrs. Ryan again. "I call it a shame if a fine, well-grown girl like her sits down to play the piano and do fancy-work, with the unfortunate mother of her killing herself."

"Meg was a pet of mine when she was a little girl," said Miss Hevey; "before all the trouble came to Killisky. She had a deal of character then. I wouldn't be surprised now if she didn't surprise us considerably. She'll strike out a way for herself, I'm thinking; she won't be going the way of sheep over a hedge, like all the other girls."

"And what do you think she'll do?"

"It won't be making samplers and playing the five-finger exercise all day with her, I'm sure of that. Maybe she'll be for taking the load from her mother's back. The little woman's carried it long enough."

Mrs. Ryan gave a shriek of horror.

"You don't mean that you think she'll make a show of herself, like her mother before her?"

"A brave, honest, hard-working woman. I take off my hat to her."

"She showed you the door, Maria Hevey."

"I understand her motives, and respect them."

"She made Killisky a prison for that unfortunate man. I often wondered the law didn't interfere."

"Don't talk about it, Judy Ryan. When there's trouble in a family, like that, it's best left alone. But the child couldn't please you anyhow. Whether she stays at home or whether she goes out, you have the hard word for her all the same."

"I'm sure," said Miss Lennon, peacefully, "she might work and be none the worse of it. You managed your own affairs, Maria, and I'm sure you're a pattern to us all in ways."

"I'd rather go to the poorhouse any day," said Eliza Nolan, with a faded simper, "than look like Mrs. O'Donoghue. 'Tis unwomanly, I call it."

Miss Hevey smoothed a fold of her rich black silk.

"I couldn't have done it myself," she said. "I always thought a deal about clothes. But all the

same, poor Nora O'Donoghue's frieze is like the Legion of Honour to me."

"Why couldn't she work her farm, and yet not make a show of herself?" asked Mrs. Ryan again.

"Because Con had run through a lot, with his drinking and gambling. There was none she could trust, and she had no money to buy capable service. It stands to reason that she couldn't *like* to do as she did."

"I dare say the girl's ashamed of her," said Mrs. Ryan.

"That I'm sure she's not," said Miss Hevey, warmly. "But I'll find out for myself what she's like, for I'm going up there one of these days."

"The mother won't want you."

"She will, indeed. Her reason for barring the door is buried with poor Con."

"I'm sure the poor girl's lonely," said Mrs. Gleeson.

"I'm not likely to be much of a companion for her," said Miss Hevey, "at my age, and an ignorant rustic."

"Oh, dear! and you with the grandest of education,

and so fond of a book, and the fine clever mind," said Mrs. Gleeson.

Miss Hevey looked pleased.

"I've no belief in a woman turning into a turnip," she said, "even if she does live in the country. But here comes Dr. McGrath, the first of the gentlemen. Now we can stop scandalizing our neighbours, and fall to losing our tempers at Spoil Five instead."

"Well, then, it would be a queer day you'd lose your temper, Maria," said Bridget Lennon. "I'm no player myself, so I see most of the game; and I could never tell yet whether you were winning or losing."

"'Tis all in the day's work," said Miss Hevey, "and, playing among friends, the money's only lent. I don't mind whether I lose or win so long as the good cards come to me, and I do them no discredit. That's a thing the cards will never forgive you." And then, as Dr. McGrath, a military-looking elderly man, with a bristling grey moustache, stood by her chair, she turned to him. "You're welcome, doctor," she said. "Here we've been cackling and screeching over our neighbours, as women always do when there is a lot of them together."

Dr. McGrath bowed over his hostess's hand almost as if he would kiss it, and the women looked at each other. It was well known that there had been a kindness long ago between Tom McGrath and Maria Hevey; and when the doctor had come back from India, with a pension, to settle in his native place, his renewed friendship with his old love had not passed unnoticed.

The doctor's arrival seemed to have brightened up the party considerably, and, as one man after another came dropping in, things went perceptibly better.

When they were gathered, at last, round the mahogany table and cutting for partners, Mrs. Ryan expressed the general opinion with effrontery.

"This is better, Maria Hevey," she said. "I can't help it, but I always hate a hen-party."

"So do I," said Miss Hevey. "And now, if you please, Judy Ryan, it's your lead."

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE RIVER.

A CUCKOO called dreamily from a little coppice close by. The wood-dove moaned in the woods of Killylea; the corn-crake sawed in the meadows; the sound of the river, as it fell over a weir a little higher up, added to the dreaminess. It was no wonder Meg O'Donoghue had let her book fall, and closed her eyes in the hot, drowsy day.

She was in a little boat drawn under the shade of the trees. The boat swung up and down sleepily with the water. There was no one to see her but the blackbird and the thrush, and only the sparrows to gossip. Meg thrust a cushion under her head, pulled her garden hat over her eyes, and fell asleep.

Her mind was in a state of dissatisfaction. It chafed her to hear her mother get up and go out when the birds were singing at dawn, while she herself was supposed to lie hours yet abed, and

to come down, at last, to a comfortable breakfast, daintily spread on a table in the bow window overlooking that corner of the garden where the clove-carnations and sweet-peas stood thickest.

As she had supposed, at first, there was not enough work in the house to keep another pair of hands busy beside Bridget Cormack's. Nor was that worthy handmaid at all inclined to have her duties interfered with.

When Meg had gathered the flowers and arranged them, had pulled the old furniture here and there at her pleasure, had set all the windows open to the sun, and fed her canary, there was nothing for her to do all day but amuse herself.

That she should desire anything else scandalized Bridget as well as her mother; or, at least, Bridget fell in with Mrs. O'Donoghue's point of view, and discouraged Meg's desire for activity.

"Now, don't you," she said, "be givin' yourself the habit of always wantin' to be doin', doin', doin'." 'Twould be a most unfortunate thing if you got thim ways, seein' your mother's bent on doin' for you. An' you can't come interferin' wid my work, for I've just got it in rotation like tinkers on an ass;

an' bedad, 'twould be like a dropped stitch if you came meddlin' wid any of it. I'm surprised at you, Miss Meg, an' rale surprised at them nuns that they didn't tache you better."

When Meg's whilom ally rounded on her in this way, there was nothing for her to do but to give in—for the present, only for the present, she assured herself.

It was a lonely life for the girl, for even Miss Hevey had not yet presented herself; it being the thick of the haymaking season, and the spinster preoccupied, though she gave herself no such hard life as Mrs. O'Donoghue.

So Meg's only company was Snap, the Irish terrier puppy, which her mother had brought home to her to ease her ill-conditioned desire for activity.

Snap lay on the end of Meg's skirt as she slept in the boat, his chin raised and his bright brown eyes watching the birds in the branches overhead. Now and again he caught a fly deftly and swallowed it, but without losing his benevolence of expression; for Snap was at the puppy age, when the heart of a dog overflows with kindness towards everything.

He did not even growl at the sharp swish of the

line in the air as a rod was cast just beside him. Instead, he lifted an inquiring nose over the bow of the boat and thumped his tail, as much as to say that it was pleasant to have company.

"Why, where did you come from, little chap?" asked the owner of the fishing-rod. He had not espied the other occupant of the boat, but he spoke low to avoid scaring the fish.

Snap only answered him by an increased thumping of the tail, and his silky, pointed ears quivered with friendly excitement.

"They haven't left you alone here moored in a boat, have they, old fellow?" asked the fisherman again.

Snap stood up on the edge of the boat and smiled insinuatingly at his new acquaintance. Only the nose of the boat projected from the screen of leaves, so that Meg was still hidden.

The fisherman, who was equipped with long boots for wading, stepped into the water, and deliberately pulled the boat a little way towards him, so gently, however, that Meg still slept. He was so amazed that he almost uttered an exclamation which would have awakened her. As it was, his comment to himself, under his breath, was—

“Who would have thought of finding the Sleeping Beauty in this part of the world?”

And yet, so far as he could see, the epithet was hardly warranted. The girlish figure, in its washed-out French muslin, which had still an indefinable air of elegance, had the charm of youth and slenderness. The hands, the fingers of which turned inwards to the rosy palms like the hands of a sleeping child, were delicate and well shaped. For the rest, he could see only a glimpse of milky throat and a firm white chin.

“Ah,” he muttered, drawing a long breath, “I wish I could see her face.”

Snap was meanwhile leaping about and licking his hands with frantic, though silent, demonstrations of delight. The girl stirred in her sleep, and the man, dropping the veil of boughs, withdrew softly.

“I have no right,” he said to himself, “to peep any longer.” For he had a feeling that the quiet figure lying there in the heart of his woods put him, in a sense, on his honour.

He went on towards the weir, carrying his rod; but though the fish rose well, and the condition of

the river was ideal, the quiet, contemplative mood which belongs to the angler had passed.


His mind was turbulent with curiosity as to that hidden face. He wished almost that he had given way to the temptation which had come upon him to startle her, so that she might have wakened and revealed herself to him unseen.

Yet again he felt he could no more have broken that innocent and confiding sleep than he could have roughly awakened a sleeping child.

Then he said to himself that he must soon discover who she was. Girls like her did not drop in and out of any world, much less this sparsely peopled one, without folk knowing something about them. His mind ran over his acquaintances, wondering which of them could be her host. It was odd, too, to find a girl of her condition—for she was plainly a lady—out by herself in a boat, with evidently any amount of time on her hands.

That she could be the daughter of his tenant at Killisky never struck him. If the thought had come to him, he would have dismissed it as too wildly improbable.

Suddenly, when a pull at his rod had distracted



his thoughts, a boat shot round the bend of the river. He leant eagerly forward for a moment. Then he uttered a sharp exclamation.

It was Meg O'Donoghue's boat that was swinging, and swaying in the centre of the stream. Just here, at this point, the current ran very swiftly. The river narrowed towards a single-arch bridge, a few yards beyond which, it tumbled, a mass of foaming water, over the weir.

The girl was very pale, but quiet. She had lost one of her sculls, and with the other she was vainly endeavouring to head the boat for shore, but the current was too strong for her. Slowly and surely she was being swept on towards the arch of the bridge and the roaring falls beyond.

And there was the face he had wished to see. The soft, creamy tints of it were for the moment blanched, but the mouth was firm, and the large eyes full of light. As he watched her the boat swayed towards the shore.

"Ah!" he said, drawing a long breath, "she is thoroughbred. Bravo! bravo!"

Meg had relinquished for a moment her effort to save herself, and had stopped to pick up the

little dog. Her voice came to him across the water—

“Swim, Snap!—save your life, old fellow!”

The dog gave one piteous yelp towards her as she dropped him into the water. For a second he turned to the tail of the boat; then he struck out sideways for the shore, swimming strongly.

“Keep her head straight!” shouted the man on the bank. “And when you have shot the bridge, be ready to catch a line.”

The boat was now dizzily plunging towards the arch of the bridge. As he shouted his commands the girl looked towards him, without surprise, and nodded her head. The next moment he was making for the bridge for dear life.

As the boat shot through the bridge she saw him there waiting for her. Beyond, the water creamed and foamed, and the air was full of thunder and spray. She gave one look towards the falls, then she looked at the man on the bank with the fishing-tackle in his hands, and was ready to help him to save her life.

As the boat came opposite to him he flung the line. The boat swerved and swayed with the shock of its sudden arrest.

"Ah—bravo ! bravo !" cried the man on the bank again.

The girl had crouched in the boat, and had caught the line as he flung it.

Slowly, slowly he backed, drawing the stern of the boat towards him. Through the noise of the waters he could almost hear his heart. What if the line were to part ? For greater security he passed his end of it about his wrist. The girl, crouching there, kept the boat, so far as she could, steady ; and so he drew her, at last, out of the mass of waters.

"What possessed you——?" he began, as he drew the head of the boat to shore.

But her eyes looked beyond him.

"The dog?" she asked.

"He is all right, the little beggar. *He* was not in danger. See, here he is!"

Snap had come plunging down the steep bank, shaking the drops from his coat and barking joyfully.

"Ah!" she said, "I am so glad he is safe."

"But you," he demanded almost angrily. "How did you come to be in such danger?"

She answered him meekly, as if she acknowledged his right to be imperious.

"I was silly enough to fall asleep under the trees, and the current caught the boat; and when it began to move out I awoke and found that one of my sculls had slipped from the rowlock. I thought I could paddle her to shore, but I could not. It was very stupid of me."

"You did splendidly! Not one girl in a million would have behaved as you did."

Meg lifted her eyes to him, and in their golden depths there was pleasure at his praise. A sudden memory of her danger smote him again, like a sharp pain.

"You should not be out by yourself," he said, almost harshly. "This river is treacherous, and full of currents."

"I was all right if I had not been silly enough to fall asleep."

"You understand river boating?"

"When I am with my friend, Mdlle. de Neuville, in Touraine, we are much on the river, and alone."

"Oh, well, you must take care here. What do

you suppose would have happened to you if I had not been at hand? It was the merest chance that left me free to be fishing."

"I should have gone over the weir."

Again the golden glow in her uplifted eyes dazzled him.

"You need not think I did anything," he said shortly. "It was a happy accident some one happened to be here with a line, that is all."

For he could see she looked upon him as having saved her life, and he was not inclined to consider what he had done in the light of an exploit.

"Very well," she said, understanding. "I am very grateful, then, that some one happened to be here with a line."

"What are we to do with this?" he asked, looking down at the boat.

"I suppose I could not take it back with only one scull?"

"You! Great heavens! Since I was the man with the line, I want you to promise me never to come so close to the weir again. The river is safe enough higher up."

"I promise. But I can really manage a boat. It was my stupidity in falling asleep and leaving the scull where it could slip."

"Yes; it might have happened to any one. But there must never be the remotest danger of its happening to you again."

"I have promised."

"Thank you—yes. And now the boat. I shall send some one to fetch it home. But where? I am afraid I do not know."

A slight touch of embarrassment crept into both faces. Then the girl's laugh cleared it away.

"I forgot. I am Meg O'Donoghue, from Killisky Farm."

"And I," he lifted his hat, "am Gervase Fitzmaurice."

Not a trace of the surprise he felt at hearing she was his tenant's daughter appeared in his face.

"I am going your way," he said. "Let me have the pleasure of knowing that you arrived home safely."

CHAPTER V.

A NEW FRIEND.

THE school-friends wrote to each other weekly, and the post that brought Germaine de Neuville's thin budget was eagerly looked for by Meg O'Donoghue. It was an escape into a freer, wider atmosphere than that of the dull life at the farm. A world of no gaieties, indeed, but of an air lofty and serene, for, in the old château, perched upon its rock above a winding river, plain living and high thinking were the rule of life.

"Ma mie," began one letter, "I wish the distance were not between us. Daily, hourly, I have thoughts I would impart to thee. I have news of some moment. My marriage is postponed a full six months because of the death of M. St. Victor's mother: a saintly soul, and so dear to her son. In comforting him—for he is much in need of comfort

—he is grown dear to me, almost as dear as Paul ; and he is kind, so kind. Daily I apprehend more clearly what Mère Maitresse said to me at the convent, that the will of my father is the Will of God.

“ I wish thou couldst come again, now that the corn turns honey colour, as last year when thou wert here. Some one else wishes it, too—ah, my poor Paul ! He has been to Paris again, and has found critics to rave over his *Nuances*, to predict that he will be among the poets of France one day. But I dread Paris for him ; it is one reason why I must be in the world—to be near him.

“ If thou wouldst only care for him a little—not sisterly, as thou carest for me. Even in Paris he has not forgotten thee ; and with thee he would be safe. I know what thou hast said before, my Marguerite : that thou art not noble, and hast not a *dot* proportionate to our rank. But Paul loves thee ; and my father would accept thee, for he loves thee already as a daughter, though at first, perhaps, he might grieve that Paul had not brought the much-needed money to Château de Neuville. And surely a de Neuville gives his own rank to his bride.

“My *fiancé* loads me with gifts, and will have me accept his benefactions, too generous, for my poor. It is a rare soul the Lord has given in my charge, though it is of the world. And ah! those men, my Marguerite, those poor men, they are our children.

“I have seen the chests of fine linen my mother wove for me, and embroidered with her own hands. How much of love and hope for me she set in with the stitches—the dear, dead mother who never lived to see her girl grow tall. Yet thou knowest, my Marguerite, and she surely knows, that I have striven to do my best for the Vicomte, my father, and the little Paul she left orphaned. I pray she smiles on my betrothal this day.

“What wilt thou think when I confess to thee that so much of Martha is in me, that I delighted in the cool feel and sweet smell of the linen? Perhaps thou wilt say I am unstable, and have forgotten St. Cyprian. But no; it is only that the will I have obeyed has sent me unlooked-for joys.

“Another piece of news. Thou wilt remember Laura St. Victor, the sister of my *fiancé*, who came one short six months to St. Cyprian. She is good, this Laura, though more of the world than thou or I.

She tells me that she has a friend—I forget now the name, but Mabelle is the Christian name—who lives not so far from my Marguerite. Laura will visit her one day, and you may meet, for she will look for thee. It may be soon, it may not be until after I am—Madame; and I shall have thee with me for my nuptials, shall I not?"

Meg O'Donoghue laid down the letter in her lap and looked before her dreamily. So Germaine was going to be happy, after all. She could imagine the light in her eyes and the flush on her dear brown cheek when that "Madame" was written. Did, then, the giving up of one's self for others often bring such a reward?

She could see the room in which Germaine sat as she wrote her letter, a high, cold, sweet apartment, with its faded tapestry, and the dim chairs, and tabourets, gilt-framed, and worked by ladies long dead. A room full of the sun and the air, and musical with the song of birds, the tossing of the trees, and the sound of many waters.

Then Paul, with his eager, dark face and slight figure—Paul, with his beautiful fancies and rainbow hopes. Ah, she could be very fond of Paul, could

love him dearly—almost as dearly as Germaine loved him,—but with no such love as a wife must bring her husband.

As she remembered Paul's ardours and despairs, Meg smiled and sighed. Paul's poetry would become the rage, one of these days; and he would be consoled for her coldness, and would turn to the delighted worship of little Victorine, his remote cousin, who could bring money to gild the old banners of the de Neuilles.


Despite Germaine, Meg was glad her own heart made it easy for her to deny Paul. She thought of his father. Her thought of him was of the old, white reverend head bent in prayer in the chapel of a clear morning. She could hear the priest's quavering old voice; she could smell the roses about the open window, and, lifting her eyes, she could catch a glimpse of the light upon the irised breasts of doves as they cooed upon the window-sill.

The memory came to her sharp and sweet. She was proud with the honourable pride of her old blood; and she said to herself that even if she had loved Paul, she would still have turned from him,

since the daughter of an Irish farmer—and with that dark stain in the past of her family—could hardly be a fitting mate for the last of the de Neuilles.

She had little to do but think, those long, lonely days. She saw little before her except loneliness. If she had never gone to St. Cyprian's, she might, perhaps, have found her mate among those farmers and shop-keepers, whose loveless marriages made her shudder to think upon. Perhaps—and perhaps not. She thought, herself, that she could never have been satisfied with the things that satisfied Kilcolman.

In the little parlour, where the afternoon sun came through masses of greenery, Meg, like many an imaginative girl before her, sat with her chin in her hands, and looked at her life. She said to herself, with a gush of rare self-pity, that it would always be just as it was now and she companionless—for there was no companionship with her mother, dear as they were to each other. She fancied herself losing the brilliance of her youth; and even before her time came—for despite her mother she would take her place of hard work and exposure—her



beauty would be marred by the seasons and the sun and wind.

She went and looked at herself in the little glass, the gilt frame of which was covered with yellow tarlatan to protect it from the flies. Her cheeks, which had the glow of a peach, with something of the gold of a ripe apricot, were seamed with the cracks in the glass, and blurred by its imperfections.

What matter, she thought, there would be none here to notice when she lost her good looks. Captain Fitzmaurice, who had known she was a lady, and treated her as one, despite his imperious ways, he would have married his cousin; and she would be only a peasant, and not of their world. At the thought her heart cried out, and she longed for the wings of the swallow that she might fly to Germaine and the austere, delicate life of which she had seemed to form a natural part. It was at this point in her meditations that Miss Hevey very opportunely made her appearance.

She came dressed in a handsome tailor-made cloth gown, slightly embroidered with silver. Something about her, with her piled-up grey hair, her keen, agate eyes, her height, and her whole manner

impressed the girl with a sense of distinction. She had noticed Miss Hevey before at church, and had wondered at her unlikeness to the others.

"Well, Meg," said the deep, frank voice. "I may call you Meg, mayn't I? I held you in my arms when you were only born an hour."


"I had forgotten," said Meg, stupidly.

"I never expected you to remember, my dear. But I am your mother's old friend, though she gave me up with everybody else. I can tell you I would have stuck like a limpet; but she shook me off, at last. However, she won't mind my coming back—now."

"No, indeed; she will be glad for me to make friends. She mentioned you the other day with affection. Poor little mother! she has no time for friends."

"So the long blockade of Killisky is over. Well, I promise you the doors won't be closed against me so easily again. Why, there's my photograph, Meg, up there in the little black frame, looking very spotty and wearing hoops. Bless me, what guys we were in those days!"

"I am sure you were never a guy," said Meg.



"You must have looked very nice, though not nicer than you look to-day."

"Now I'm glad to hear you say that, Meg," said Miss Hevey, well pleased, "for I thought, when I saw you, that I should like to be friends with you, though I'm old enough to be your mother. You won't be able to pick and choose here, child."

"But I do. I picked you on Sunday morning when I saw you in church."

"Did you now? It is real nice of you to say it. I'll tell you what. Come and have a drive with me. I've to see a sick woman above at Tubber-vogue. We can talk as we drive, and it will be better for you than moping in the house!"

"I should love to. But you'll have some tea?"

"Not now. I take my tea of evenings—a meal that would surprise you, child. You'll often have it with me, I hope, though I'm told high tea's dyspeptic."

"I'm used to it. It is mother's evening meal too."

"All right, then, come along; and I'll have you back before your mother's home from the sheep sale. I saw her drive by this morning."

Meg climbed to the seat of the high dog-cart,

behind a long, rakish-looking bay, which had been giving lame Johnny, the boy-of-all-work at Killisky, a considerable amount of trouble to hold.

As Miss Hevey mounted beside her, Bridget Cormack came out from her kitchen, smiling broadly.

"My blessin' on you, Miss Maria," she said; "this child's fairly mopin' herself to death. It's like old times to see you back again."

"It feels like old times to come. I'm only sorry herself's not here."

"She'd be proud to see you," said Bridget. "Come again soon, anyway."

"You think your mother would be glad—eh, Meg?" asked Miss Hevey, as they drove up the mountain road, with a glen of great beauty opening before them.

"I am sure she would."

"She left a sore place in my heart when she turned from me, Meg."

"Poor mother!"

"Yes, I know. She turned even from those that loved her best. Perhaps I wasn't patient enough. Anyhow, I got vexed in time; and there were the children to see to, so I hadn't over much time

to follow people who had shut the door in my face."

"The children?"

"My sister Eily's brood that I reared for her when she was taken. None of them liked me, after all, well enough to stay with me. So here I am an old maid again in the end of my days."

She laughed with cheerful philosophy.

"Eily had no more sense than to marry a sailor, and the two lads took to the sea—they'd have nothing else. Then the two girls are married; they went roving even before they were married, for they had the roving drop in them. They all expect me to keep house for them, so that they may come back when they've a fancy; and the girls send me the babies, when they're ailing, to be coshered up. 'Tis cool treatment, I tell them, seeing that only for them I might have had a husband and children of my own."

"Ah," sighed the girl, listening.

Miss Hevey looked down at the sympathetic face.

"Never mind, child," she said, "it's only my way of talking; I'm glad when they send the

children. The next best thing to being a mother is to be a foster-mother. Why, there's McGrath riding on before us! Do you know the doctor?—but, of course, you could not yet. I suppose he's on his way to visit poor Maureen Kelly, as well as ourselves. I wonder how he knew I was coming to Tubbervogue to-day? We hunt in couples, McGrath and I. I'm the idle woman, once the haymaking and harvest are over, that has time to get about; and the doctor's spoiling for practice, and glad to get it where he can. Why, there you are, Dr. McGrath! Allow me to introduce you to Miss O'Donoghue."

The doctor pulled up his steed and bowed politely.

"I took her with me, doctor, as she was newly come, to show her the ropes. I'm telling her we're all very good people to know, except, perhaps—perhaps, Judy Ryan. She's a greedy card-player, though, Heaven forgive me, I'm glad to have her to make up a table. But Judy knows what I think of her."

"She ought to, for you've told her," chuckled the doctor.

"I only told her that I took my tea at home

before I joined her card-table, because, if I put my legs under her mahogany, I couldn't talk against her. Oh, I don't do it only behind her back, Judy knows. But here we are, doctor. Miss O'Donoghue had better stay here, if she's not afraid of The Fox—that's the horse's name, my dear."

"Here's Pat will stand by his head," said the doctor, as a melancholy looking young peasant came out of the cabin.

"Come here, Pat," he called out, "and hold The Fox for Miss Hevey. How's Maureen, to-day? A bad night? Well, well, I'm afraid we have to expect it, Pat, my poor fellow."

Miss Hevey swung herself down, passing by the doctor's offer of assistance, and, drawing a big basket from under the seat, carried it herself into the cabin. While Meg waited, her thoughts came and went about the people and the place. Now she watched the purple shadows on the hillside; again she looked at the sad, stern face, half-turned from her, which invited no friendly approaches.

"Maureen's worse," said Miss Hevey, when she returned to her place and gathered up the reins " 'Tis not much longer poor Pat'll have her."

“What is the matter?”

“Consumption. You can’t keep up health on stewed tea and yellow meal stirabout. ’Tis poverty kills them in this glen; nothing less than starvation, my dear. We do what we can; but, sure, we can’t keep a mountain-side alive, let alone that you can’t make paupers of them. The Fitzmaurices used to give a deal of employment in old days. Now ’tis as much as they can do, people say, to keep themselves going. The poverty of the people means their poverty, too. They won’t take rent from such creatures as poor Pat above. I’ll tell you what, my dear, we’re all going to the poorhouse together.”

CHAPTER VI.

A LITTLE CLOUD.

“So you have come into the wilderness again, Mabel,” said Captain Fitzmaurice, smiling down at the dainty, dark head of his cousin.

“I have left the wilderness behind me, rather,” said the young lady, stroking the soft folds of her loose gown of fine muslin, sprigged all its way with the most seductive roses and rosebuds.

Miss Egerton knew the value of soft, feminine garments to her beauty. She left tailor-mades to her taller sisters, and was always to be seen in some cloudy garment, out of which her pale face and violet eyes looked with a wistfulness which was a little deceptive.

“Really?” said the Captain, in answer to her last remark. “Was the Park then deserted, and Belgrave Square a solitude, and not a frock to be seen in Bond Street?”

Miss Egerton laughed.

“ You’ll never believe, Gervase, that I’m anything but a hardened worldling. Yet I am glad to get back to dear Killylea, and—— ”

“ And what, Mabel ? ”

“ Well, to its owner, I suppose.”

Captain Fitzmaurice touched the dark head caressingly, as if it were the head of a pretty child.

“ I am an unworthy fellow,” he said.

“ Oh no, you’re not. I’ve met many this season more unworthy than you.”

The Captain laughed.

“ They probably thought themselves not unworthy.”

“ You’ve hit it exactly.”

A slight frown gathered between the somewhat heavy brows.

“ Are you ever sorry, Mabel ? ”

“ If I were I should tell you, Gervase.”

“ And Lady Dufresne ? You have not told her yet that you are going to take Gervase Fitzmaurice, his eagle’s nest, and his poverty for good or ill ? ”

“ Gervase Fitzmaurice, his stainless descent, his honoured name, himself, worthy of those who went

before him, and — ah yes, the Hand of the Crusader !”

She lifted her eyes to his, and there was a soul in them.

“Why, Mabel,” said the man—“Mabel, you think about these things. How dear you are !”

“But the Hand,” she went on, “would be a superstition to my Aunt Dufresne. She would understand it as little as she does you. You are too serious for her, too little of the world, too buried in a mouldering past. I tremble to think of the shock it will be to her.”

She patted the hand that was nearest.

“She will say that I took advantage of your youth and inexperience.”

“If she said so I would not stoop to justify you.”

“Many will say so,” said the Captain, gloomily.

“And you will never tell them that I—I—made you break silence ; and that it was you who would not bind me, nor let the engagement be known until I had seen the world under Aunt Dufresne’s wing.”

“And what do you think of the world, now you have seen it, child ?”

“You know it, Gervase.”

"It is always changing, like the chameleon. And how do I know what colours it may wear in your eyes?"

"Frankly I found some of it seductive."

"It would be strange if you did not."

"I am no nun, Gervase."

"No, my sweetheart."

"I was never tired. I danced through I don't know how many pairs of shoes, and was always gay as a lark in the morning."

"You don't look as if you had been hearing the chimes at midnight. You are as fresh as a white rose."

"I've come home through the dawn nearly every morning for the past six weeks—delicious dawns, even in London, though there were none but the homeless cat and the policeman to appreciate them"

"And many revellers, including one very lovely young woman."

"Ah, you become a courtier. I met a man of your old regiment, Major Pontifex, at dinner one evening; he said he knew you gayest of the gay. I told him you had become serious, and grown grey hairs, since you had had charge of me."

"Ah, Pontifex. He was a pleasant fellow, and they were good days; but they couldn't last, with the old place crumbling about my head. I had to do something to retrieve the family fortunes, else it might happen that Clare and I should have to let Kilylea to a soap-boiler, and go wandering round the world with the Crusader's Hand shelterless."

"Major Pontifex said you would have risen high in the service."

"If I had not turned my sword into a plough-share. It is another kind of service, and I may perhaps rise high in it, though it doesn't look very like it at present."

"Scientific farming, my poor Gervase, is not adapted for this wild country."

"I need money, Mabel, and I have not got it—that is the trouble."

"There used to be a rent-roll on this estate."

"Things were better then. My ancestors roystered with the best, and my teeth are set on edge. I can't press those poor beggars up there on the mountain-side; and the bog-slide of fifty years ago cut the heart out of the property."

"My poor Gervase, why should you have the responsible spirit ? "

"Because I was born in the nineteenth century, perhaps. I take things to heart. Sir Giles up there ran merily through what would have rebuilt Killylea to-day."

He nodded his head towards a jolly-looking gentleman, who adorned the study wall, in a hunting-dress, and with a whip in his hand.

"They thought the lean days would never come to Killylea. Certainly they oppressed none, and they called all in to partake of their jollity. Sir Giles's tenants fortified Killylea and defended it when the bailiffs came in hordes; and when he was dead it was as if the country was waking its father."

"They would not grieve half so much for you, though you take them so seriously."

"I am a dull fellow besides Sir Giles."

"And humour rejoices the Irish heart. Sir Giles was a Sunday man and went free that day; but once, on a week-day, when he wanted to attend a wedding, he announced a funeral at the Castle and went forth in a coffin."

"So he did, and the bailiffs wept over him. And to think I am his degenerate descendant!"

"He exhausted the jolly vein."

"And you have suffered for it, my little Mabel—shut up in a mouldering castle with a recluse like Clare and a dull, serious fellow like me."

"I am glad my father left you my guardian, Gervase. I shudder to think of what I would have been if I had been left to my Aunt Dufresne."

"You would have been Mabel still."

"I should have been a nasty little outcome of the commercialism that made the Egertons rich while the Fitzmaurices became poor."

The Captain lifted her hand to his lips.

"You were very little commercial, when you thought of me for a husband."

"It is because of the commercial taint in me that the Fitzmaurices fascinate me. You are as little of this world as Sir Maurice."

"I'm afraid I'm very little good for this world, or I'd make my farming pay better."

"You ought to have remained a soldier. You were cut out for it—a big, grave, strait-laced soldier. You are wasted at these experiments."

"I should have had to let Killylea, or see it in ruins."

"Would it be so dreadful to let it, Gervase?"

She said it with a half-frightened glance at him.

"Let it, Mabel!" he repeated, in a shocked voice.

"Let Killylea! You are not in earnest."

"It would do no harm, I suppose," she said humbly. "I don't suggest it myself; but supposing you could command a good rental for it, most people would see nothing wrong in letting it until it had redeemed itself."

"It is out of the question, of course," he said, with an air almost of stupefaction. "But, as a matter of fact, supposing I could get a big rental for it, and were willing to let it, it would take my lifetime to redeem it."

"It would be taken care of. With you, it will become every year more ruinous. It wants troops of servants and all manner of repairs to keep it as it ought to be—to keep it standing, even."

"Perhaps so; but I could not let it."

"You know best. You see, I told you I was commercial-minded. Your soap-boiler reminded me that I know a really decent kind of a soap-boiler,

who would take Killylea, I think, and care for it. At least he is looking for such a place. We could be happy enough, Gervase, somewhere else, while the big place retrieved itself and was saving up for us."

She lifted her hand to silence him till she had said her say.

"My money will be only poured into a sieve. I shall not grudge it for anything near your heart, be sure; but I see plainly that it will not go far—not so far as it is needed."

"Your money will be settled on yourself, Mabel. I shall use none of it for my purposes."

"And I shall see you grow greyer every day, looking for El Dorado in a bog-hole."

"I shall pull something out of the bog-hole yet. Anyhow, it need not come to letting Killylea."

She saw his mind was fixed, but her feminine obstinacy would not be defeated.

"Then I need not tell Mr. Fry, my soap-boiler, that I know where the desire of his heart is to be found."

"An eligible property, with all manner of shooting and fishing, a pack of hounds hunting twice a week during the season within easy reach, boating and

golf, an ancient castle in rags and tatters, and the Hand of Sir Maurice Fitzmaurice thrown in. Would that do?"

"It would not do at all. This is no world for soap-boilers. But," she added audaciously, "I can answer for it that the last item would have been the most attractive of all to Mr. Fry. Ghosts are common—but a relic!"

"I dare say, Mabel; but wherever I go the Hand goes, so there would be an item the less."

"Then we won't talk about it. Poor Mr. Fry! I think you would almost change your mind if you knew him."

For some reason or other she blushed as she said this; but Captain Fitzmaurice was too disturbed by her suggestion to notice, or perhaps would not have noticed in any case.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CHOICE OF A LIFE.

"I AM not fit for a lady's drawing-room," said Captain Fitzmaurice, pausing on the threshold of the parlour at Killisky; "I am covered with mud."

Meg O'Donoghue came to meet him with her quiet greeting as to an old friend.

"Pray come in," she said; "we are used to mud at Killisky."

"I hadn't better wait in the porch and smoke a cigar? I shall do very well. I am really ashamed to come in, but Bridget would not listen to me."

"Bridget was right. Sit down there while I give you some tea. My mother will be in punctually at a quarter past six. She comes home with the plough-horses."

She smiled, but it was a smile without mirth.

"Ah," said Captain Fitzmaurice, sinking into a

big chintz-covered chair with a long sigh of satisfaction, "this is pleasant, after reclaiming bog for six mortal hours."

The girl's eyes met his, and both smiled with understanding.

"My mother has a great respect for you," said Meg. "She says you've the right stuff in you, and will succeed in your farming against the disbelief of all the county, because you don't mind, at a pinch, turning in and taking a hand yourself."

"I have to," said the Captain; "I have some demon of energy driving me on. So they don't believe in me, eh?"

"Except Miss Hevey and my mother. They are revolutionaries, you see."

"They are both good, practical farmers. If I wanted any encouragement, which I don't, on my headstrong way, I'd rather have it from those two women than all the old farmers in the county."

"You reciprocate my mother's good opinion?"

"I do, heartily. She is a great woman."

Meg wondered uneasily if that admiration involved a knowledge of those dark years in her mother's life, and the heroic struggle she had made

to keep the home together. But there was no hint of such a knowledge in the man's frank eyes.

"Pat Ryan says you'll have no luck at all," she went on, after a minute. "You've levelled a fairy rath in some of your reclamations, and rooted up I don't know how many fairy thorn trees. Then you wouldn't send your cow, when it was sick, to the fairy doctor."

"And, morebetoken, she died," said the Captain, seriously. "And so she would if she had had the staff of the Veterinary College. Andy Cahill trades on their ignorance, if, indeed, he's not as ignorant himself. But I was sorry about the rath; it stood right in my way, or I would have let it be."

"Tom Gleeson says you have the place destroyed with 'a puffin' divil' of a steam-plough."

"Ah, Miss Meg, I have come to you to hear what the neighbours are saying about me."

"They'd say it to yourself, Captain Fitzmaurice."

"They do, Miss Meg. Old Andy Cahill, who came to offer me his professional services for my cow, assured me I'd never reclaim the bog, that under it was a bottomless lake in which St. Patrick drowned the biggest serpent in Ireland. 'An' I

wonder, Captain,' he said, 'that you, belongin' to a fine ould ancient family, 'ud be doin' your best to root up ould beliefs an' ould customs.'"

"They shake their heads over you, indeed, Captain Fitzmaurice. They say the fairies will have their revenge on you for the loss of the rath."

"I don't like the steam-plough myself; I am glad it is out of sight and hearing of Killylea. I like the ploughman and his horses going up and down the black furrows, though I destroy the peace of it with my Puffing Billy."

"You would not easily acknowledge yourself beaten."

"Nor you, Miss Meg. You are your mother's daughter."

"I have done nothing to show it—yet."

The two looked at each other again with that perfect understanding and sympathy. Their friendship had been growing during those months since that day Captain Fitzmaurice had saved Meg O'Donoghue from being carried over the weir.

Now he watched her, with a sense of restfulness, as she stood by the table piling golden second-crop roses high in a bowl.

"Ah," she said, as the door opened to admit Bridget with the tray, "now I shall make you your tea, and mother will be in by the time it is ready."

"Your tea-table looks jolly," said the Captain—"better than any dinner-table of my acquaintance."

"These are pretty things," said Meg, her hands moving over the old china as if she loved it. "I found them hidden away in a cupboard when I came home, giving joy to no one. My mother wouldn't know what she was drinking her tea from. I am trying to teach her the pleasure of having it from old dragon china, instead of the commonest stuff in the Kilcolman shops."

"I read somewhere in a book," said the Captain, absently, "that there is nothing a woman can do in which she looks so sweet and home-making, to a man who loves her, as when she is busy over the teacups."

A sudden electric flash of consciousness struck both. To Meg it was like a sharp pain—a shock that, after a moment's cessation, set her heart beating.

The man, on the other hand, jerked himself upright his full length, and looked his sternest. Each was angry with that inner conscious self, and each hoped

that the other had not noticed the involuntary betrayal.

"Miss Meg," said Fitzmaurice, after the awkward silence had passed, "when will you let my sister come to see you?"

The girl looked at him with a frown of impatience, as if they had threshed out the matter before.

"I shall not have time," she said stiffly, "for visiting and being visited."

"Not later, perhaps," Fitzmaurice said, almost humbly. "But now, what have you to do that would prevent your receiving Clare?"

"I have taken over my mother's accounts; it is the one thing she has no time for. I never was any good at arithmetic, and they have been let go for years. Thinking of them keeps me awake at night."

"Ah, that explains the little frown you are acquiring. I began to think you kept it for me."

"Why?" said Meg, with sudden sweetness. "Why should it be for you? You have been good to my mother and me."

"Thank you, Miss Meg; though I don't know about the goodness. But you will let me bring Clare? She wants to come, and you *must* like her."

"Miss Fitzmaurice is very good."

The man looked perplexed, as a man will over a woman's sudden, inexplicable coldness.

"Then Clare may come?" he began, hesitatingly.

"Captain Fitzmaurice," said Meg, with decision, "I have made up my mind to remain in the class I was born into. Indeed, I can't do anything else, if I would, though I could be very uncomfortable with one foot on sea and one on land. I have been making the acquaintance of some of the old neighbours; and though I should much prefer your sister's friendship to that of Mrs. Ryan and Miss Nolan, I'm afraid my place lies with them."

"Your place!"

"My place. If I hadn't happened to go to St. Cyprian's, and to assimilate as I did the life about me, and to have been the friend of Germaine de Neuville, I should now have been dusting a chair for you with my apron, instead of drinking tea with you as an equal."

"You are a lady; nothing can better that," said the Captain, doggedly. "And though one needn't add anything to it, you are very clever—too clever, or you would simply accept our friendship, and not think so much about it."

Meg's face softened.

"If I were a simpler girl, I dare say I should be happier. But I have had to think things out for myself; and my mind has been sharpened by contact with minds finer than my own. Then, during those months since I came home, I have had nothing to do but think. If I had been a coward"—she lifted her head proudly—"I should have gone back to St. Cyprian's, or to—to Touraine, and stayed there and forgotten all about this perplexing life. But I am not a coward."

"No need to tell me that."

"So I shall stay, and live my life, and shall be ready to be my mother's right hand when hers fail."

"You will live your life; but you need not refuse alleviations."

"I shall not be so lonely. It is fortunate, in this corner of the world, to find a woman like Miss Hevey. I can make her my friend."

"You are right," assented Fitzmaurice, gloomily. "She is a fine creature, and straight as a die. But she is old enough to be your mother."

"I don't want girls. Their ways are not my ways."

"Upon my word, I believe you. You think like an old woman."

"I am obliged to."

"Your mother, Miss Hevey, your old servant!—you will be surrounded by elderly people."

"Except Snap"—lifting the dog's silky ear.

"You need not tell me you will make friends with the country people. You won't."

"There is Mrs. Gleeson—a soft, motherly creature. I have made friends with her already."

"You won't with her daughters presently, when they are grown up."

"How do you know, Captain Fitzmaurice?"

"They won't with you, whether you want it or not. They would be afraid of you, ill at ease with you, if they did not dislike you."

Meg swept him a little mocking bow: the action, suddenly young and a little coquettish, contradicted her assumption and his accusation of an undue wisdom.

"Yes; I know it's rude"—stubbornly—"but you would be horribly out of place at their dances and festivities; you would be a foreign element. I've no doubt some of them—the ill-natured ones—detest

you already, at sight, for the way you carry your head, and your frocks. There's something about your frocks."

"They are French; but they will wear out, and I shall get new ones from Dwyer's, in Kilcolman. I think you're very ill-natured, Captain Fitzmaurice. Still, you're right, to some extent. Miss Hevey told me, with great enjoyment, that Mrs. Ryan describes me as a peacock."

"Detestable woman!"

"My own people, Captain Fitzmaurice."

He turned from her with a gesture of despair, and fingered some of the trifles on the mantelshelf. Suddenly he faced her again with a new thought.

"You did not reject the friendship of those French people," he said.

"The circumstances were different; I was free to choose there. But I did not choose to stay with them, and leave poor mother to her lot; my friendship with Germaine taught me better than that."

"You could have stayed with them?"

"Yes," said Meg, with a new timidity; "I think I could have stayed—if I would."

He was on the point of asking her another

question, but curbed himself as though by a strong effort of his will. One glance he gave her as she stood submissive, ready apparently to answer him; then he turned and drummed on the mantelshelf.

"Very well," he said; "you will not have Clare. I shall not trouble you any more."

"It would have been a privilege—she has so beautiful a face; but I think I am right."

"Nor—nor my cousin. I wanted you to know Mabel."

"Thank you; it is better not."

There was a heavy step in the passage without, and Mrs. O'Donoghue entered, relieving a moment of tension.

"There you are, little mother," said her daughter, "dead tired as usual. And Captain Fitzmaurice has been waiting to see you for quite a long time."

Mrs. O'Donoghue sank down into her chair.

"Just wait, Captain dear, a bit," she said, "till I rest myself. The old head of me's not that clear this minute that I'd be able to take in what you were talking about."

She looked up at her tall young daughter, who was deftly unfastening the buttons of her big coat.

"Do you know, Captain," she said, "'tis the pleasantest thing in the world to have a little daughter to come home to of an evening. The world isn't the same place to me since I've had my Meg back with me."

Her daughter stooped and kissed her. Then she shot a glance at Fitzmaurice, a glance full of light and love. It said as plainly as possible that this was her return for a world well lost.

CHAPTER VIII.

MEG'S FRIEND AND MEG'S WAY.

COUNSELLOR FITZMAURICE was by far the most popular person in the county. He was a little red robin of a man, who might have earned the title by which he was commonly called from being everybody's adviser in their difficulties. However, it really derived from the fact that he had chosen the Bar for a profession, and spent a certain number of not unprofitable years in practice at it.

He might, perhaps, have gone on and taken silk, and climbed to the Bench, in time, but for an irreparable misfortune which overtook him. This was the death, after an accident in the hunting-field, of the girl to whom he was devotedly attached, and in whom he had found, indeed, the other half of his heart and mind.

Elderly people still remembered Mr. Theobald's

sweetheart, Miss Emily Phillips, a fair, smiling, gracious creature, overflowing with the milk of human kindness. She had lived long enough after her lamentable accident to say good-bye for this life to her dear Toby, and to make her will bequeathing to him her little house, with its park and gardens, and her money in the Funds, which was quite sufficient to bring him in a snug competence.

These gifts of his poor dead girl made Toby Fitzmaurice a matrimonial prize, even without his prospects at the Bar. But, though he seemed to bask in the smiles of maids and matrons, none, in all the years that followed Miss Phillips's death, came any nearer to his heart.

He had not added to the general sum of grief by his way of taking his trouble. The blow which killed his youth had laid no axe to the root of his cheerfulness, which by-and-by sprang up like a leafy tree that harbours singing birds in its branches.

People who remembered said that he had hardly aged at all in the thirty and odd years since his loss. Then middle-age had seemed to fall on the chubby youth in a single night, and middle-aged he had remained.

He laid down his ambitions upon his Emily's grave. Immediately after her death he withdrew from practice, and came to live in her little house. He kept everything as she had left it—her servants, her dogs, her horses. It was as if the mistress were away for a day, and might return at any hour to find the sunny house waiting for her.

The sunshine of the Counsellor's cheerfulness did, indeed, irradiate all about him. He did not share in the feeling of awe attaching to the other members of the big family of the country-side. There was hardly a hearth in the district, however humble, by which he had not sat, and he could not pass by a cabin without being reproached by the more juvenile members if the usual piece of sugar-stick was not forthcoming.

And here he was now, sitting by Mrs. O'Donoghue's sofa, that indefatigable woman having been laid low by a more than usually overmastering attack of "the rheumatics."

"And did it come on suddenly?" he was asking, in a voice full of sympathy.

"I've been racked with it for months, off and on, though I wouldn't let on to Meg. 'Dead tired, you

are,' she said, the very last evening I was about. 'Dead tired it is,' said I to myself, and feeling as if the long rest of the grave wouldn't be an hour too long for me."

"You're but a young woman, Nora, to be talking like that," said the Counsellor, who had danced with her at her wedding. "I'm a dozen years older than you, and I look to be here a good many years yet. To be sure, I've led a lazy, worthless life. As Tim the Tinker said when I reproached him for excusing himself from working on the plea that he was worn out, and he six months my junior, 'Aye, but look at the atin' an' drinkin' you've had.'"

"Poor Tim," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, unconsciously. "I'm afraid he's drunk a deal too much himself, and little eating to it. You'll be more missed when you're gone out of it than all the busybodies. Do you remember the time I talked to you about sending Meg to St. Cyprian's?"

"You asked my advice about it, and you had your mind made up all the time."

The Counsellor twinkled all over his rosy face.

"'Tis the way of women, you know. And yet you were against it, I well remember, though you

gave in at last. And, do you know, this many a night back when the pain kept me awake, I've been thinking you were right after all ? ”

“ Well then, Nora, it must have been the pain, for you're not the sort to look back like that ; and I can't agree with you. Meg's a living justification of your ambition for her.”

“ Ah yes, 'twould be hard to beat her,” said the mother, with pride. “ And yet, when I went to meet her at the railway station, forgetting, in my eagerness to see her, how rough and strange I'd seem to her, there was a look in her eyes, as she stood there holding her head like a stag's, that fairly stabbed my heart.”

“ Poor Nora ! ”

“ She was a little one when she left me, you see, and I hadn't got my queer, rough old ways ; and she'd become used to the fine friends she'd made at St. Cyprian's. I'll tell you what her eyes said, Counsellor. They said, as plain as could be, ‘ Is this *my* mother, this queer old bundle of men's clothes ? ’ Aye, and said it with fear and dread. Aye, to be sure, she was looking like a young princess herself, the creature ! ”

"It would be a passing feeling, Nora, even if you read her expression rightly. The girl's pure gold, and is not likely to undervalue her mother."

"'Tis a comfort to tell some one about it. I realized then that I might have done the right thing, maybe, according to my lights, but I'd gone the wrong way about it."

"The great thing is to have done the right after all."

"You know how it was, Counsellor dear," said the widow, not seeming to heed him. "I hadn't the heart to care how I looked, or to mind the jeer and the laugh that used to follow me; they've grown used to my queer ways now. But, sure, it came sudden-like to my poor Meg."

"Those who laughed laughed from ignorance."

"Maybe. When I came back that day that Meg came home, I laughed myself at the figure I cut in the glass—laughed, aye, with the tears running down my face. I don't know when I looked in a glass before. Anyhow, I've done with the things now. I'm not a bad-looking woman yet, Counsellor, now I've got back to my woman's clothes."

"Indeed, I was thinking how nice you looked in them, Nora."

"They're old-fashioned, but I tell Meg they'll do me my time."

The widow pulled closer about her shoulders the little black lace fichu which had an air of faded elegance. It was surprising how the roughness of years seemed to have dropped away from her with the change of garb.

"But some one must see to the work, Nora," said the Counsellor, after a pause.

"I wish I had a little boy," she said fretfully. "Womenfolk are useless creatures at best."

"To think you should say it, Nora!"

"I ought to have been let keep my place. I never wanted to be a man-woman."

"You must let Meg take up the work."

"She's been talking to you about it?"

"What if she has?"

"She waited till I was laid low, and the spirit crushed out of me, to look to get her own way."

"She'll wait long to find you spiritless, Nora."

"Oh, indeed, what use am I, lying like a log here, while the child I reared delicate wants to go trapesin' the world—a show like her mother before her?"

"She doesn't want your old coat, Nora. She can do the work without that."

"She wants to destroy the dream of my life—that she should be a lady. Handsome and clever, she is to be a drudge of a farm labourer! I was surprised when Maria Hevey backed up the girl's folly. I never thought to hear you do it, Counsellor."

"What else is there for it?"

"We could sell."

"There is nothing going for land at present—and think of all you've put into it. Meg, who seems to thoroughly understand your affairs, says you are only beginning to get it back."

"Why will she stick her nose into such things? I reared her as I did that she might only know the softness of life. Why isn't she content with the nonsense that pleases other girls?"

"The brave blood of the O'Donoghues bids to be otherwise."

"I wouldn't mind her whims or her fancies if I weren't laid helpless here."

"Look here, Nora, you're looking at the whole matter crookedly. Meg won't be a drudge; plenty

of ladies in England are turning to farming and market-gardening now for a living, and no one thinks the worse of them for it. In Kilcolman they don't know any better, but you have proved that you care nothing for the gossip of Kilcolman."

"I'm not sure," said the widow, gloomily. "It is the only place I know anything about. But is it true, Counsellor dear, what you say, that the ladies are taking to the land?"

"True as gospel."

"The mischief bother them! Why aren't they content with the good lives they have?"

"Oh, Nora, Nora, to hear you say the like, and you the most practical woman I ever knew!"

"The more reason, perhaps," said the widow, cynically, "that I'd like to change places with them that have nothing to do."

"The world is changing, Nora, and there are many ladies must work or starve."

"'Twouldn't be my idea of ladyhood."

"Well, well; I'm afraid you're a crusted Conservative. But, all the same, I trust your good sense, Nora—I trust your good sense. What harm can the fresh air and the face of Nature do a girl?"

For my part I'd wish to place her among no more healthful and happy surroundings."

"She won't be content with it. 'Tis to fair and market she'll want to be going next. She won't go tinkering at anything she takes up, I'll be bound ; she'll go the whole way with it."

Her air of mingled pride and reprobation brought the twinkle to the Counsellor's merry blue eyes.

"Well, even so, if she does go to fair and market, she'll keep her dignity through it all. And those she meets will respect her because she will know how to respect herself."

"Oh dear, oh dear, that I should lie here to listen to talk about such a thing !"

"I'm afraid she's inherited the taste from you, Nora. My nephew tells me she is an enthusiastic farmer already, though only a theoretical one."

"The Captain's encouraged her."

"I'm afraid he has, Nora, and she him."

"She won't go the way her mother went before her ; she'll be pulling the place to pieces about my ears."

"She is your own prudent daughter. She has been devouring books on farming that Gervase has

lent her; but she'll go cautiously, never fear. Her good common sense will steer her straight."

"She'll think we were all a pack of omadhawns that went before her."

"She'll ask her mother's advice about everything, or I'm much mistaken in her."

"She might do worse"—with gloomy pride. "Even Captain Fitzmaurice doesn't scorn to do that."

"Then it is settled," said the Counsellor, rising cheerfully to his feet. "With you as the ruling spirit, and with such friends as Gervase and Miss Hevey, the young farmeress can't go very far wrong."

"You've settled it without me," groaned the widow; "and me lying here on my back, not able to stir a limb. I don't forbid it, Counsellor, because you've over-persuaded me, that's all."

"You won't hinder her, Nora?"

"I'm not that kind. She knows how I feel about it; but if she wants advice I'll give it to her straight."

"That's right. And now I'll tell Meg you've consented to her taking up the work."

Meg must have been within hearing, for she came at the first summons.

"You may begin the work to-morrow," said the Counsellor, "with your mother's blessing."

"*Ah!*" cried Meg, with a low sound of delight.

"I didn't say to-morrow, and there was nothing about my blessing," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, reproachfully. "But I don't suppose it matters; my word doesn't count for much now."

"For everything, little mother, now and always," said Meg, running to her and kissing her.

"There, there, child, I'd rather you kissed me for something else. I don't like to look at you, Meg," pushing her away sorrowfully. "What sort of a complexion do you suppose you'll have this day twelve months?"

"I assure you, Nora," said the Counsellor, "that complexions are quite gone out of fashion. So my cousin, Miss Egerton, who has just had a London season, tells me. What with lawn tennis and golf and bicycling, there really was no room for the complexion. It may come in again, but at present it's entirely out."

"There, you're laughing at me," grumbled Mrs. O'Donoghue. "And 'tis your turn to laugh, for you've had your way with me entirely, so you have."

CHAPTER IX.

PASTORAL.

"I WANT you to come with me and see my new purchases," said Meg O'Donoghue, looking up into Captain Fitzmaurice's face.

He was gazing down at her from his seat on a satin-skinned black mare, whose beautiful, sleek neck the girl's hand was absently caressing.

"What did you give for them?"

"You'll have to guess that."

"If I guess less than you gave?"

"I shall be horribly mortified. But I must expect to make some mistakes in the beginning of my career. However, I don't think I've given Jerry Crowley any cause to chuckle over me."

"You bought them from Jerry? You won't get many bargains from him."

"I felt my own temerity. It was the dark of the morning, too, and I couldn't see you anywhere in

the fair; I think you must have been gone to your breakfast. Billy"—to a small red-headed urchin who had lounged round the corner of the house, with a straw between his teeth, which he was chewing in horsey fashion—"come and hold Captain Fitzmaurice's mare."

They strolled away through a low green gate into an orchard, within whose sunny glades a number of young calves were sporting. These were running races, according to the most approved racing rules, when the pair of human beings came in sight. They stopped short an instant and stared at them, frisking their merry tails, then approached them with the curiosity of their species.

Meg took up an empty pail and held it towards them, uttering the "suck, suck" of invitation with which young calves are brought to the feeding. Immediately the little herd gathered around her fearlessly, pressing their white and roan muzzles into the pail, and licking her hands all over with their little rough tongues.

"It's a shame to disappoint them," she said, laughing up at him; "but it's only an hour ago since they were fed. They are greedy little things."

"And thriving," he said. "You don't seem to mind their tongues; some girls would hate to be licked that way."

"Fine ladies," she said contemptuously. "I love it; they are such little soft things. Look at their dear faces. I am very glad I am to be Farmer Meg. I could do anything for them only give them to the butcher."

"You need not do that," he said; "you can sell them as yearlings."

"And shut my eyes to the future. We have to do that, haven't we?—even with little children. There is a cloud upon the future."

"They are happy enough now, anyhow."

The orchard was dappled with sun and shadow. Overhead the lichened branches made a network against the blue. Spring was already come, and the first pink buds were upon the old trees; there was a shower of daisies in the grass. The orchard was a very pleasant place.

The calves now had realized that the pail held nothing for them, and had darted away in twos and threes to resume their interrupted game. A flock of geese, with a majestic gander at their head, and

followed by a number of fluffy yellow balls of goslings which showed no more than dandelions in the long grass, came down a sunny arcade. There was a hooded well close at hand ; the water within it was pellucidly clear, and had a tinge like amber. Little steps went down to it, the lower one covered with water. Over the dark green stones below one could see, now and again, the silver fin of a tiny fish.

Meg seated herself by the well.

"You haven't told me what I ought to have paid for them," she said.

"Did you give twenty-five?"

"Twenty-six ; and got back a shilling luck-penny," she said. "How well you have guessed ! I wish I knew as much about those things as you."

"You bid fair to. I would have given Jerry just so much."

"I offered him a pound apiece," she went on, looking to him for approval, "and he asked me thirty shillings. We split the difference."

"Ah, you will do !" His smile had a grave amusement. "Think of your learning the way of it so soon ! You are a practical farmer now ; yet

I was thinking of you as something not practical—a picture I have seen somewhere of a girl by a well in an orchard, listening. What was it ? ”

“ I know. It is a picture of Bastien Lepage—Joan of Arc listening to the Voices.”

“ Yes, that was it ; I had forgotten. And you—what do you hear ? ”

“ Little calves lowing, little lambs bleating, the corn pushing, pushing through the clay underground, the grass starting. Oh, I hear voices almost as good as hers.”

“ What would the neighbours think if they heard you talking like this ? Jerry Crowley would ask you, at least, twice as much for his calves as he intended to take.”

“ Jerry would think me an *omadhawn* !—you see, I’m picking up the old words again ; I shouldn’t talk like that to any one but you here. These are things even Miss Hevey would not understand ; she comes nearest.”

“ I am glad you feel you can talk to me,” said Captain Fitzmaurice, with a half-shy pleasure. “ I told you you were committing yourself to a lonely life.”

"With all this in it?" she asked, with a gesture that took in the fair and smiling country around them. "But it has its compensations. I had rather be a milkmaid in Boeotia than have a *salon* in Paris."

"The milkmaid is a thing of the past," he reminded her; "and the mere name suggests a playing at pastoral life. It would not suit you at all."

"You are right; it would not. I take kindly even to the hardship; I came back from the fields, last night, so wet that my skirt dripped about my feet as I walked."

"You were foolish to get so wet," he said, with a frown. "I was rather afraid you'd be overdoing it. Rheumatism, or worse things, are not pleasant; and it would put an end to your work."

His displeasure disturbed her.

"I couldn't help getting wet, Captain Fitzmaurice," she assured him, humbly; "I was far away from any shelter. And I changed as soon as I got in. The rain was so sweet in the young grass; it wasn't cold rain."

"It means rheumatism no less. Look at your mother!—the rain was just as soft when it fell on her."

"Ah, but she didn't change. I know what she used to do, poor little mother; she used to come in and sit looking at the fireless grate, with the wet sopping about her feet, too tired to go upstairs to change till she got chilled through. I shall never do that. When you are out in the rain it does you no harm; Nature takes care of her own. But once you shut yourself within those unnatural little boxes upon boxes which are called houses, she withdraws all her loving care. You have to adopt unnatural precautions then."

"Don't get wetter than you can help."

"I can get very wet without going to look for it—under these skies," said Meg, glancing up at the blue, across which were drawn almost imperceptibly fine lawny clouds. "How many times a week do you go home wet?"

"I am a man; wet doesn't do a man harm—besides, I am used to it. You have been tenderly sheltered all your life."

"While my mother was in the wind and rain. Fortunately, I am strong; and more, I believe I take kindly to the climate. I have had no suspicion of a cold since I began."

She laughed up in his face with sweet, sudden mockery.

"You are the worst of counsellors," she said. "Think of telling an Irish farmer not to get wet! Do you think this is Arcadia, and that I am a shepherdess, with my crook hung with pink ribbons and my hat garlanded with roses?"

"As much as I think myself a shepherd playing on pan-pipes. You look a most practical person, on the contrary."

She looked down at her country homespuns and stout brogues almost affectionately.

"I am keeping you idle, all the same," she said. "I only wanted a word of encouragement about the calves."

"How does your mother like you—as Farmer Meg?"

"She will get used to it in time; I could see I was a shock to her in this work-a-day dress. She liked my faintly flowered muslins and delaines. Curious, seeing how she had given up all pretty things for herself!"

"She had not given them up so long as her child had them," said Fitzmaurice, with an unmasculine

flash of understanding of a woman's heart, which somewhat surprised his hearer.


"I am an affliction to her," said Meg, softly, shaking her ruddy head.

"She is not more reconciled?"

"She wished yesterday that I might have stayed at St. Cyprian's—as a nun."

"As a nun! What is she thinking of?" Captain Fitzmaurice's voice was almost rough. "A nun!—it would be the last life to suit you. You are fitted for"—he paused a moment for a phrase—"more human things. It is different with Clare, my sister, who is already a nun at heart. I am surprised at Mrs. O'Donoghue—but she was not in earnest?"

"I believe she was. I think she would have been happy thinking of me as leading the elect life; she has such ambitions. You know there is hardly a Sister at St. Cyprian's who is not noble. Instead of the ordinary, every-day ambitions, she would like to think of me moving among all those high-bred and saintly women in that beautiful place, walking on marble, amid mosaic and precious pictures and stained glass. It is her poetry, Captain Fitzmaurice. The trailing black habit of the nuns would be




beautiful in her thoughts for her only child; there is a suggestion of her own working garments about this which shocks her."

"No wonder you are unlike other girls; she is certainly unlike other women. But a nun!—impossible!"

"She has no fear of marriage either. It is not as though she had a grudge against all men for the sake of one."

She stopped and blushed deeply. Then her colour ebbed again till she was as nearly pale as rich-coloured Meg could ever be; but he had detected no significance in her words. He was still frowning blackly over that suggestion of the conventual life for her, and had apparently hardly heard her latter speech. After that swift glance at him, she went on more easily—

"If she were like her neighbours, she would be thinking of a good match for me. The older the man the better, for he would have had more time to put by money; and the meaner and crabbed the more desirable, for he would have saved the more. To have one's child the Bride of Heaven is surely a finer ambition than to marry her to Andy Nolan



who has the shop in Kilcolman, or Lanty Casey of the Mulla Farm, though both are eligibles as they regard such things here."

His frown became blacker than ever.

"No one would dare to think of you in such a connection," he said. "You mustn't speak of it."

"It will be spoken of for me," she went on, with a feminine pleasure, that was half fear, in exciting his anger and indignation. "Miss Hevey tells me that the subject of a match for me has much engrossed the Kilcolman gossips. At first I was looked upon as too much of a useless, fine lady to be desirable. Now that I have become a working woman, I please some better, and some even worse. They are conservative in Kilcolman, and like a woman to keep to her kitchen and her dairy."

"They would not dare to speak of you in that way!" he began, tempestuously.

"Ah, what does it matter?" she said, springing to her feet; "they mean nothing degrading to me. After all, I am one of themselves. I am making myself used to the thought of it. St. Cyprian's, my mother's beautiful dream for me, is fading like a dream, though I keep some precious things alive out

of it. Do not try to hold me back, Captain Fitzmaurice; I return of right to the life that is mine by right."

He looked at her, baffled and helpless.

"You will go back to them?"

"I accompany Miss Hevey this evening to a party at Mrs. Ryan's."

"I hope you will like it," he said grimly.

"Some of the people I like already; others, I suppose, I shall never like. It would be the same anywhere I went."

"How does Mrs. O'Donoghue like your making those new friends?"

"Old friends," she corrected. "I have failed her so horribly that anything, after my taking to farming, cannot matter. I don't know what she intended me to do. Is it fair to hang me between earth and heaven—to cut me off from both classes? I am so much human that I cannot bear this belonging to nobody; I shall try to be like them."

"You will never succeed."

"Haven't I shown my adaptability in the way I have taken to farming?"

There was something pathetic in her smile. She

lifted her eyes to him with an appeal in them which, at another time, would have moved him. But he was irrationally angry because she had rejected the offer of his sister's friendship and would go her own way, amid surroundings he disapproved of for her. He turned as if to go without looking at her.

"You have done very well with the calves," he said. "Can I do anything for you in Kilcolman? I should have been there by this time."

"If you pass Pat Finerty's you might ask him when I'm to send for my harrow. I ought to be harrowing this week."

"I shall remember," he said shortly.

He rode down the grassy lane from the house, at a great rate, as though his business in Kilcolman were of importance.

Meg was turning away with a little tremble of the lip, when her mother called to her from the open window by which she was sitting enjoying the mild, sunny day.

"Was that the Captain, Meg? I thought I heard his voice."

"What hearing you have! It was Captain Fitzmaurice," said the girl, smiling up at the window in

the gable and the slightly querulous face which looked down upon her.

"Why didn't he come in and speak to me?"

"I remember now he was going to. He called about the seed oats; but I took him to see the young calves, and I kept him so long talking that he had to go off in a hurry after all."

Meg's face looked conscience-stricken.

"Indeed then, miss," said her mother, "I think you're very selfish and pushing. Sure, 'tis what happens when a woman's sick and forgotten. I like a talk with the Captain, and he likes a talk with me. I hear something from him of what's doing, not old farming talk for ever, like what I may expect from you."

"I'm very sorry," began Meg, looking up with a pained face.

"Where are you going to now?" asked the mother, harshly. "Did I hear you telling Billy to bring round old Bob?"

"He wants a shoe. I thought I might leave him at the forge on my way to the fields."

"Can't Billy do it?"

"He has to milk. He will fetch him afterwards."

"I think you like doing men's work. I wonder what the Captain would say."

Meg flushed.

"It can hardly matter," she said gently—"though why should he mind? it is nothing one ought not to do. Don't be angry with me, motheren; a little while ago you praised all I did."

"You were my good, beautiful girl then, and I was proud of you; now I'm vexed over you all the day. 'Tis my own daughter I see in you, and I don't like it."

The arrival of Billy with the pony put a stop to the too-familiar reproaches. It was a sad-faced Meg who went down the boreen leading the little grizzled beast. She had patience with her mother's unreason as she would with that of a child; but it was a fret and a trouble in her life all the same.

CHAPTER X.

HER OWN PEOPLE.

MEG's soft muslin skirts were crushed between the silks of two Kilcolman damsels. Considering that she was built on lines that promised to be generous, she looked deceptively slender between the blue silk of stiffish texture trimmed with blue velvet, and the grey which, except for colour, was a replica of the blue.

They were seated around a wide mahogany table on which were a regiment of teacups, many varieties of cakes, plates of more or less thin bread-and-butter, and all the kinds of preserves known to the housewife. Judy Ryan herself was presiding over the teapot of worn silver which was an heirloom in the family. The great china cups, which had been handed down through many generations in the Ryan family, were more precious than silver. In the

proper market they would have fetched, indeed, their weight in gold; only anything so impious as to sell them could never be contemplated by the Ryan family, although the Misses Ryan, having been to boarding-school, would have preferred more genteely-sized cups, as well as a handed-round tea. But, of course, they knew their mother was not one to have her usages interfered with.

Anthony Ryan, the son and heir, was passing the teacups and pressing the barmbrack and hot, buttered griddle-cakes on the ladies. He was the apple of his mother's eye; a good-looking youth of his type, but with an easy assurance of manners which went far to spoil him for the sensitive in such things, although he was a great buck with the girls of Kilcolman. He had very blue eyes, ruddy cheeks, fair hair with a curl in it, and a short, curling beard. The beard was an item about which the Kilcolman girls were not generally agreed, some arguing that Tony Ryan would be twice as good-looking if he only wore a moustache, like Captain Fitzmaurice and the military men they sometimes caught a glimpse of on a hunting-day. Others thought the beard a right manly adjunct; and it was to be observed that

these were the young women whom Tony chiefly singled out for his favour.

He liked to be considered a flirt. "To have a rag on every bush" was, perhaps, the description of himself which he most coveted. To this end he cultivated the gay and bantering manner, towards which he had a natural leaning; he was accustomed to set every girl he came near to giggling. Meg's two flanking damsels were in convulsions every time he approached them, and his eye had an answering merriment as he airily helped them to sugar, with a quotation of "sweets to the sweet."

It was hot in the little room, with its stuffy carpets and curtains, although the grate had already its summer garniture of shavings and tinsel. The wall-paper was a heavy flock, the curtains were red moreen. The tea and the tea-cakes helped the heat of the room; and no one thought of opening a window.

Meg's neighbours were both damsels of ample charms, and so tightly were they fitted into their silks that they looked as though bursting from them. What between the hot tea, and the pleasant confusion caused by Mr. Tony Ryan's banter, the poor

girls had become uncomfortably flushed. To Meg's eye their neighbourhood sensibly added to the heat of the room.

She looked longingly towards the window, against a pane of which leant the cool cheek of a monthly rose. Up and down the gravel path paced Miss Hevey and Dr. McGrath, enjoying the pleasant evening outside.

Miss Hevey had had her evening meal, as usual, before joining Mrs. Ryan's circle.

"Judy 'ud never forgive me," she had said to Meg, "if I didn't bring you for tea. She's used to me going my own way. But she's impressed by you, Meg avourneen, though she hasn't a good word for you; and she'd like to show off her silver and her china and her fine cake-making to you, to say nothing at all of Tony."

One of the girls, Delia Mulligan, followed the direction of Meg's eye.

"'Tis a wonder, so it is," she said, "that Miss Hevey wouldn't be afraid of takin' a cold, walkin' about that way in the damp of the evenin'."

"Sure, people never think of such things when they're courtin', Miss Mulligan," Tony Ryan

remarked. He had just swept down upon them with raspberry jam. "If you were to ask me to take a walk with you out there, this minit, is it feelin' cool I'd be? You'd find me warm enough, never fear."

Miss Mulligan giggled hysterically, remarking that she had never known such a fellow for impudence. Miss Connors, on Meg's other hand, suggested, with a little acidity, that Miss Hevey's courting days were over.

"You never can tell about women," said Tony Ryan; "the older they are the greater fools they are about men. I wouldn't trust my own mother if my father was to give her the chance."

"What impidence have you got about me, Tony?" asked Mrs. Ryan, in high good-humour.

She was sensible of Tony's unusual devotion to the part of the table where Meg sat; and was rather pleased, than otherwise, at the mortification she suspected in some of the other maids, and matrons as well. Tony being an only son was a catch in the county, and was not likely to be impoverished by his sisters' dowries. Neither Judy nor Pat Ryan believed in dividing the property; and unless the girls went back to the convent where they had been

at school, which seemed unlikely, Judy was secretly determined they should marry elderly suitors who wouldn't be so particular about the amount of the *dot*.


"Don't you be listenin' to what was never meant for you," Tony retorted lightly. "When a fellow's talkin' to girls, everything he says isn't meant for his mother's ears."

Mrs. Ryan laughed. To her prejudiced maternal eyes Tony was surpassing himself this evening. Those fools of girls, she thought, needn't be taking Tony's extravagant compliments to their eyes and lips for gospel. Tony wasn't meant for *them*; he was meat for their betters, she said, in her arrogant heart, thinking of the tidy bit Mrs. O'Donoghue must have put by, and the fine heart the farm was in. She was not insensible, either, to Meg's grace and refinement of look, which the wind and the weather had left unimpaired so far. Looking at the three girls opposite her, she mentally pronounced Meg's neighbours "as vulgar as a kish of brogues" beside her; and her heart gave a quick throb of exultation at the thought of the learning and accomplishments Meg would bring to her husband as well

as the worldly gear. She never doubted that Tony could be that husband if he chose, and his choice appeared to be tending that way.

After a time the last cup of tea was drunk. Before that stage was reached some of the party had left the parlour for the drawing-room, whither Meg would fain have followed, only that she was too tightly wedged in between the gray silk and the blue silk, neither of which gave any indication of moving. But Mr. Tony Ryan had yet to drink his tea, having, as he expressed it, been put to the pin of his collar to keep their appetites going, so that the carver's allowance of time was fairly his.

He brought his enormous cup, the very look of which sent the young ladies into convulsions of laughter, to the corner where Meg sat helplessly wedged. Having asked Miss Mulligan and Miss Connors to sweeten it with a smile, he sat down to make a very hearty meal amid the ruins of bread-and-butter and cakes with which the table's late comeliness was marred. He drank his tea to a running accompaniment of chaff, directed at his fair companions—or at least at two of them. Meg, silent and disapproving, whetted the mental appetite of



the young gentleman who had always been accustomed to being met at least half-way by the fair sex.

He had not invited Meg to sweeten his tea. Indeed, if the truth must be told, he sent her instead a meaning glance, designed to call her attention to the folly of the two girls, and the graceful way in which he was fooling them to the top of their bent. Meg did not meet that bold, roving blue eye. What matter? He liked them a little stand-off: a fellow didn't always want to have it all his own way. Being a "dog with the girls" had perhaps begun to pall on that rustic Lothario Mr. Tony Ryan.

Suddenly the strains of a piano playing some merry dance-music were heard from the drawing-room. Almost immediately Mrs. Ryan made her appearance.

"They're formin' the first set, girls," she said to the group, "and ye'll be left out of it altogether if ye don't hurry up."

Miss Mulligan and Miss Connors bounced up with great rustling of their skirts, and excited anticipation of the pleasures to come in their faces. The young men of the party had not sat down to

tea, but had been regaled with whisky-and-water on their arrival, and were now awaiting their partners for the dance. After all, even Tony Ryan paying compliments impartially between three wasn't the same thing as having a swain to yourself.

They put their arms round each other's silken waists with artless affection and strolled away, while Tony's eyes and his mother's followed them with the same malicious glint of amusement.

"They love each other like cat and dog, don't they?" said the young gentleman, with a grin.

Meg was preparing to follow them. Though Miss Hevey was still promenading before the window with her friend, there was company to be found in the drawing-room much pleasanter than that of Mrs. Ryan and her son.

"Ah, now, sure you're not goin' to desert me like that?" said Tony Ryan, with his most wheedling smile and tone. "After me wastin' my time hum-buggin' that pair o' fools just for the pleasure of lookin' at you."

"You're not the boy I take you for if you let her do it," said Mrs. Ryan, shaking a roguish finger at them as she rustled off in her tabinet. Roguishness

did not sit naturally on Mrs. Ryan, but of that fact she was blissfully unaware.

Tony Ryan had put a detaining hand on Meg's skirt. She looked down at it—large, red, with a bloodstone ring on the little finger,—and her air was one of stupefaction.

"Just sit down," he said, "and let us have a bit of a talk. They won't want the room yet for the cards; and there's no one I like better to be talkin' to than yourself, so don't you be thinkin' there's any one else."

Meg suddenly snatched her skirt clear of his detaining hand.

"I can't stay," she said hastily. "I prefer the drawing-room; it is so hot here."

"But I'm just done, and I want you to dance a waltz with me. Don't be in such a hurry."

Muttering something inarticulate about finding Miss Hevey, she almost fled from the room, while Tony sat with his cup held halfway between the saucer and his mouth and stared after her.

"Now, what's the matter with her?" he muttered. "Maybe 'tis afraid o' me mother she is, as though I'd let me mother rule me in the choice of a wife.

I remember now she wasn't over civil to this girl when she came first, till she saw 'twas the best of her play. Aye, that must be it!"

The zest had somewhat gone out of his tea-drinking. He sent almost regretful thoughts after the two girls of whom he had spoken so spitefully; they wouldn't have left him alone in his glory. He had looked forward to the heads that should be popped in at the parlour-door and quickly withdrawn on finding the room tenanted, the meaning smiles, the rallying that he was accustomed to. It was his way to single out girls at these rustic festivities, to make himself and them conspicuous, to sit on the stairs with them, to promenade in the garden if the weather suited, to be found with them in secluded corners. To be found with them and rallied upon it—ah, that was the thing! A hidden love-making would have had very little attraction for Tony.

It was but a step across the hall from the parlour to the drawing-room. Meg was almost on Mrs. Ryan's heels as she pressed into the room, regardless of anything but to find a refuge from the unwelcome attentions of the son of the house.

There was a set of lancers proceeding. Meg looked hastily about her for some one who would give her shelter. She saw Mrs. Gleeson and her young daughter, Mary, in a distant corner of the big square room. She had taken to the kind, motherly woman at the first glance, and, since Miss Hevey was not in the room, her instinct was to go to her. She skirted the wall by the backs of the dancers hurriedly : she had a horrible fear that Tony might be behind her all the time. If she had looked back she would have been surprised at Mrs. Ryan's gaze of indignant amazement ; but she never looked back till she had reached the haven by Mrs. Gleeson's capacious skirts.

"You're not dancin', Miss O'Donoghue, dear?" said the motherly woman.

"I am really afraid I don't know how to dance," said Meg—"at least not these dances."

"Ah, sure, there are plenty to show you how. You're not goin' to be left a wall-flower long, so you're not."

"I think I won't dance. If you'll let me sit here by you I shall be much happier."

"You're very kind to wish it ; but, sure, young people doesn't go out to dances to sit in the corners

with the married women. Why, there's Tony Ryan !
—I dare say he's lookin' for you this minute."

Mrs. Gleeson made this remark with a smile intended to be jocular, but it was a poor, wavering kind of smile at best, and the speech ended up in something like a sigh.

Meg lifted a proud head, and gazed straight towards the doorway where Tony Ryan was standing. He was looking at her, indeed, but with an odd, baffled kind of look as though something stood in his way which he dared not cross. He stood so a minute while Meg gazed towards him and beyond him. The chilly refusal which was ready for him if he had asked her to dance did not, after all, need be given, for in an instant he turned and went out of the room again.

As he vanished Meg thought she heard once more Mrs. Gleeson's soft sigh.

"What is the matter?" she asked, with an instinct of sympathy. "And what is the matter with Mary? —she looks sad. And why isn't she dancing?"

Mary Gleeson was a little Madonna-faced girl of eighteen. Dark bands of hair framed the beautiful oval of her face. Her complexion was milk and

roses; her eyes a vivid blue; her teeth small and milky-white as a young child's. To-night the innocent calm—which was one of the girl's greatest charms, and which suggested something holy and predestined: she might have sat for the blessed Mary in the Temple—was somehow disturbed and marred. The childish mouth had a fixed look of pain; the lobelia-blue eyes were dim and strained; the roses of the cheeks were faded. Mary crept close to her mother's side, and there was an air about the spreading of the good woman's skirts which suggested a fond protecting and sheltering of her little girl.

Meg was rather dismayed at the reception of her question, for Mary's lip suddenly quivered, while Mrs. Gleeson blushed, and leant forward a second as though she would hide Mary's face.

"There's nothing at all the matter," she said hastily. "Mary's a little out-of-sorts, that's all. You're all right, dearie, aren't you?"

"If she isn't, I'm not at all surprised," said Meg, suddenly whirling away from Mrs. Gleeson's side to Mary's other side and unfolding an enormous black Spanish fan. "Look at the dust from that carpet!—it's horrible, isn't it? And I don't believe

there's a window open. Can't we open one? How hot the dancers look! Do you know, I think, as soon as this dance is over, we ought to make a move; it is enough to upset any one."

All the time the great fan waved between the room and Mary's face. Meg did not dare to look at her, though she guessed that the child was struggling hard for self-control; she talked instead—a quiet, slow stream of talk that asked no answer,—and her eyes were averted from the faces of mother and daughter.

After a while the dance came to an end, with the last bars of the music ending in a deliberate clash of the keys. The dancers made for the doorway of the room, which was now in a fog of dust. Meg stole a hasty glance at Mary; she had recovered herself: the tears had gone back to their source.

"Come," she said, putting an affectionate hand on the girl's arm. "Let us go to the card-parlour; we are sure to find an open window there."

As they crossed the hall they saw Tony Ryan leaning against one of the door-posts, his arms folded and a black frown on his brows. Meg felt a tremble in the arm she was holding; she never looked

Tony's way, but opened the door of the parlour where a group of the more elderly people sat around the shaded lamp, and the soft, cool air blew in from an open window.

"This is a great improvement," said Mrs. Gleeson, sinking into a chair by her husband's side. Tom Gleeson was a quiet, easy-going man, with a kind word for every one—like his wife; their lover-like ways to each other were something of a jest in a country where the domestic affections are certainly not demonstrative.

"Are you coming to bring me luck, Mary?" he asked, depositing the little tray with his money on it in her lap.

Meg, still holding Mary Gleeson, passed round to Miss Hevey's side.

"Do you want to learn Spoil Five, Meg?" her friend said, looking up at her. "If you do, take my hand, and I'll teach you how to play. But don't look into my hand, child; it's the unluckiest thing you ever did in your life."

"She's the strongest-minded woman in the country, and the most superstitious," said her neighbour, Dr. McGrath, laughing.

“Ah now, doctor, did you ever know a card-player that wasn’t superstitious?” said Miss Hevey. “I’m not afraid of any ghost that ever walked; but, upon my word, I wouldn’t do what you’re doing this minute for a five-pound note, and, that is, taking up the cards as they’re dealt to you and looking at them. It’s the unluckiest thing ever you did.”

CHAPTER XI.

A MATCH-MAKER.

WELL, Meg, my dear, you seem to have done pretty well on your first outing," said Miss Hevey; and there was the suspicion of a grim smile about her lips.

"What did I do?" asked Meg; "it was all horrible till I got to the card-playing. I think it was mean of you to leave me like that."

"If you want to know, I did it deliberately, my dear; I wanted you to see for yourself what the life was like. That's a good bit of oats you have down there; it promises a good many barrels to the acre."

Meg, sitting on the stile by which the fields were reached from the roadside, looked in the direction in which Miss Hevey's whip was pointing. The fields stretched away to the mountains. Amid the green of the young meadows, not yet brown and

gray, and the pastures, and the sprouting potato plants, the narrow field of oats was green as silk, shining as running water.

"It's the field I drained in the autumn," she answered, "and I've put a lot of manure into it. Yes, it looks like paying me. But what about my doings?"

Miss Hevey, sitting in her dogcart, looked straight along The Fox's long back.

"If I were you, Meg, I'd give it up; *that* would suit you better. You should let Miss Fitzmaurice call on you."

Her eyes were on the distant towers of Killylea Castle, clear against skies which as yet had no hint of summer mist.

Meg shook her head slowly.

"It wouldn't help me," she said. "But, tell me, what have I been doing?"

"Acquiring a taste for cards, for one thing; you took to Spoil Five as one to the manner born. It's a good wholesome game, and there's no gambling in it, only skill and science. Spoil Five is good enough for me, as I tell Tony Ryan when he wants to make me play Poker."

"But your lips are not like that because I've been learning to play Spoil Five?"

"You've been playing the deuce and all with Tony Ryan's heart."

Meg's fine mouth took a line of withering contempt.

"Take care, my dear; he might be troublesome. Tony's tasting for the first time the bewildering sensation of being despised. You've been setting the girls by the ears."

"Ah!"

Meg's expression was, if possible, more contemptuous.

"You've been helping to break little Molly Gleeson's heart."

"I!" She stood up now and went to the side of the dogcart. "What can I have to do with it? And what is the matter with the child?"

"Only that Tony Ryan has deserted her openly for you."

"Why, I didn't exchange ten words with the creature," Meg broke out, indignantly. "I was sitting by Mary Gleeson all the evening."

"Every one in the place knew—little Molly best

of all—that Tony had no eyes for any one but you, that you had made a sudden and startling conquest. There has been nothing known like it since the time Colonel Davoren carried off Miss Mary Blake. It is being discussed over all the breakfast and dinner tables of the country-side to-day.”

“You don’t mean to say she is in love with *him*?—such a sweet little girl, and a lady really. It is impossible.”

“Don’t be too hard on poor Tony; he can’t be so bad as he looks, or the little girl wouldn’t see anything in him. I quite agree with you that that mother of his has made him into what Tom McGrath calls a very complete specimen of a bounder. Still, I’ve known Tony to do a decent thing now and again, and it comes between me and his own presentation of himself.”

“I could hardly have believed it.”

“That’s because you’re young, and have the little hardness of youth, my dear. When you grow older you will come to know that there is very little unmixed good or evil in the world. Judy Ryan comes as near to being unmixed as I know; and even she’s a good housekeeper, and dotes on Tony.”

"Tell me about Mary Gleeson; I want to know. She can't really care about him."

"Molly is a simple little thing, and has never strayed beyond her mother's apron-string. She is simple enough to admire Tony's dashing ways—and he is certainly good-looking. He has been devoting himself to her of late, to the poor child's almost overwhelming pleasure; now you come, and she is out in the cold. Last night must have been one of sickening mortification to her. Oh, it didn't help her that you'd have none of him; she was deserted openly, shamelessly, before them all. I believe even Tony had the grace to be ashamed of himself, or your haughtiness wouldn't have kept him off. Molly was really your protector. Doubtless he thought you kept her by you deliberately; Tony is not one to take a repulse easily."

"I should think not."

"I wonder is Judy at the bottom of it. Yet I don't see how she could make Tony fall in love with you if he didn't want to."

She smiled to herself at Meg's fierce gesture of repugnance.

"But Judy never thought a girl of the Gleesons

any match for Tony. You don't know how that boy was brought up, or perhaps you'd make allowances. His father and mother played at battledore and shuttlecock with him. You saw Pat Ryan—a beetle-browed old tyrant,—God help those unfortunate girls of his! Well, he was for breaking Tony's spirit in every way: it's an old-fashioned idea, my dear, founded on some remarks of King Solomon's, which in our day would have earned him the attentions of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Between Pat being determined to crush the lad's spirit, and Judy giving him his own way in everything, you have—Tony."

"I shouldn't like to see Mary Gleeson marrying him."

"You're wrong there. If there's any good left in him, and I believe there is, the little girl would bring it out. I saw, last night, that he had the grace to be ashamed of himself, even while he was making himself a laughing-stock for the people, standing there by the door glowering at you, and afraid to come near you because of the pale little girl beside you."

"I'd shown him I didn't want him."

"Do you think that would dismay Tony? You

don't know Tony at all. He's a lad of spirit, I can tell you; and Judy hasn't fostered his conceit of himself for nothing. Your aversion would have whetted his appetite. He'd have been sitting in your pocket, telling you every card to play, only for little Molly. Short of getting up and kicking him out, you wouldn't have got rid of Tony. You'd be a long time bringing it home to him finally that you didn't want him. It was little Molly was the saving of you; I read it in his face as he stood sulking by the door."

"You! Why you were absorbed in your game; and the candles were between you and him."

"I could see through them; and I was watching another game as well as the Spoil Five. So was every one there except, perhaps, innocent Tom Gleeson; so was every one in the house. I wonder what the betting is, this morning, on whether you'll take Tony or not."

Meg was silent with disgust and indignation. Miss Hevey watched the expressions pass swiftly over her face for an instant, and her own gradually became maternally kind.

"There, child," she said, putting an affectionate

hand on Meg's shoulder, "I've no business to be annoying you; only I want you to feel that it's all a mistake, Meg. You might as well be talking of yoking Lord Kellymore's young thoroughbreds with that Clydesdale foal over there. Go back to the people you're better fitted for, and let us alone."

"My mother's ambition has given me no place in the world," said Meg.

"Yet you wouldn't be otherwise than you are; you know you wouldn't, not for all the world. Why, if she had let you be, you might have been in the running for Tony, like those other silly girls. There, child, 'tis only my sharp tongue; you'd never have looked at him. I believe all that was settled for you long before you were born, centuries ago, when your family were princes. That lift of your head now: that doesn't come from your mother's ambition for you. There was never a French convent could teach it; or how it would be run upon! Good-bye, Meg; you've kept me gossiping too long. I hope Tony'll let you alone; though I wouldn't answer for it."

Indeed, two days later, who should come up the boreen to Killisky but Pat Ryan himself!

Meg was out, as usual, but Mrs. O'Donoghue was downstairs, in the parlour, where a bit of fire was welcome, because it had been raining since early morning. There was much rain that spring, and the country transcended itself in green lushness. Warm sunshine alternated with the rain, so that the trees were in heavy leafage weeks before their time.

Pat Ryan was an unexpected visitor, and Mrs. O'Donoghue's first sensation was one of wonder as to what could have brought him. However, in the cessation of active life the natural love of a gossip, so long repressed, had awakened again. Mrs. O'Donoghue didn't like the Ryans, but Pat was better than nobody. She had read the *Kilcolman Observer* three times over; and it was too late for her to acquire a taste for novel-reading. She could never understand how Maria Hevey could be wasting her time over a pack of lies made out of somebody's foolish head; the newspaper and her prayer-book were literature enough for her.

"Sit down, Mr. Ryan, sit down," she said cordially. "I was just wishing for a fellow-creature to come my way for a bit of a chat."

"'Tis hard on you, so it is, Mrs. O'Donoghue, ma'am, to be tied to your sofa after the fine, active life you had, gettin' about."

Pat's eyes, under their beetling brows, were roaming hither and thither in a cunning appraisement of "the comfort" he saw around him. The solid oak furniture, the old silver—polished to the last possible degree,—the old china behind the glass doors of the cupboards either side of the fireplace, had no æsthetic value for Pat Ryan, but they represented property, and ancient, well-established respectability in a family, and these were things he could understand.

"I'll be getting about presently," Mrs. O'Donoghue said. "The doctor has great hopes of me; he's rubbing me for the rheumatics. 'Tis a new kind of treatment."

"I never heard of it," said Pat, absently. "I'm not troubled with the rheumatics myself. I had the neuralgy once, and they tould me to keep a live frog in my mouth for as long as I could count sixty; 'twas as near as near to leppin' down my throat."

"Those are foolish old remedies," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, with the consequential air of one who has been giving the doctor a good deal to do of late.

"'Tis wonderful how long people do be keeping their faith in them."

"You've a nice little place here, ma'am," said Pat, putting his thoughts into words; "I wouldn't ask to see a nicer; so quiet and comfortable. There's no peace at our place with them girls of mine playin' the pianny all day, when they're not burnin' holes in a bit o' wood with a red-hot poker, or stickin' things on the chairs that'll ketch in the back buttons of your coat and make a holy show of you when you go out."

"I hear you've very accomplished girls, Mr. Ryan," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, amiably.

"So their mother says. I'd rather see them meself feedin' the pigs, or makin' the butter; but their mother won't hear of it. When I ask her what they're fit for, she tells me they're fit for marryin' if they don't go back to the Convent. If they're as little good to their husbands as they are to me, 'tis the Convent they'd better be goin' to."

"Tut tut, Mr. Ryan, we mustn't be running down our own."

"I'll do my duty by them. Five hundred pounds I'll give, an' my blessin', to the man that'll take

them off my hands. I'm worth a dale more nor that, but I've my son to think of—not like you, Mrs. O'Donoghue, ma'am, with all your eggs in one basket."

Again the cunning old eyes flashed at the widow's unconscious face from under the pent-house brows.

"'Tis different, as you say, having only one," she replied unsuspectingly.

"I never set much store on girls myself," said Pat Ryan, with a frown of remembrance; "they're always a nuisance whin they're not in mischief. What d'ye think them two hussies o' mine took to doin' after they kem home from the Convent, and their mother as pleased as Punch?"

"I'm sure I couldn't say, Mr. Ryan."

"They took to paintin' every bit o' furniture in the house!—some new-fangled idea there was about it; you couldn't sit down on a chair but what you'd stick to it. An' the milkin'-stools they had in the drawin'-room, an' the gridirons on the walls!—you never saw such tomfoolery. At last I put my foot down about it—ay, be the mortal, I let them have it!—they'd run into a mouse-hole from me since."

"'Tis the ladies' papers they do be getting hold of."

"I know it," said Pat, gloomily. "I burnt every book and paper I could find with them behind the kitchen grate. Now your girl's a fine, useful girl; she might almost as well have been born a boy."

Mrs. O'Donoghue winced.

"I'm different from you, Mr. Ryan," she said; "I wouldn't grudge her her girl's nonsense. Not that Meg was ever given that way—in regard to the poker-work and the painting, I mean, for she plays the piano beautiful. 'Tis a grief to me that she's got to do the man's work, and takes kindly to it."

"'Tis a man you want about the place," said Pat Ryan, with an attempt at jocularitv; "you should be seein' after one."

"Sure I'm long past it," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, simply. "Many an offer I had, but I was too fond of poor Con ever to put a man in his place."

Pat Ryan shot her a glance of angry contempt for her folly and her misunderstanding of his meaning.

"'Twould be a great little farm with a man to work it," he said. "There's Tony now; there's not room for me and Tony in our place. He's a boy that

ought to be master ; and begonies, I'll be master in my own place while I'm alive ! ”

“ You can afford to give him a little farm of his own, Mr. Ryan.”

“ I'm not denyin' it, ma'am. His mother was talkin' of settin' him up in a public-house in Dublin ; there's great chances there, no doubt. There's no tellin' where Tony 'ud stop ; with his looks and his manners he'd be Lord Mayor one day, I dare say. Still I'd rather he'd stick by the land.”

“ 'Tis natural you wouldn't like to part with him, being your only son.”

“ You're right, ma'am. If 'twas the girls, it 'ud be another matter ; they might go and welcome. But Tony'll have all I've got ; I don't like dividin' the land in my lifetime. 'Tisn't likely the girls 'ud go under five hundred, or I wouldn't be takin' so much from Tony. He'll be very snug one o' these days, ma'am.”

“ You'll be getting him married.”

“ That's what's in my mind, ma'am.”

“ They were telling me something about that little slip of Gleeson's. She's a nice little girl, and I expect Tom has a bit put by.”

"Not enough for Tony, ma'am; he won't be able to bid the price for my boy. There's nothin' in it about Gleeson's daughter, so you may make your mind easy; 'twas only Tony's humbuggin'. I was just the same myself when I was his age—a rag on every bush, and 'whistle and I'll come to ye, my lad,' with every girl I met. But I humbugged with them, and I waited till I found my price. Sure, 'tis no use beatin' about the bush; I came to-day to talk over things in a friendly way."

"What things?"

A gleam of comprehension was coming into Mrs. O'Donoghue's face.

"The match-makin'. I won't deny that Tony might do better in a money way, and herself doesn't like the notion of your girl workin' about among the men. Still, we'll overlook all that, an', if you'll settle the farm on the girl, we'll consider the match as good as made."

"Am I to understand," asked Mrs. O'Donoghue, "that you're proposing a match between your son and my daughter?"

"You're very hard of understandin', ma'am," said Pat, rubbing his hands. "Did you think 'twas

betune yourself and meself the match was to be? Judy 'ud have somethin' to say to that. Here, shake hands on it!—you can have Tony home with you by midsummer. I suppose we'll have to have a bit of a spread, and give the girl time for the weddin' clothes."

Something in Mrs. O'Donoghue's face suddenly froze the smile on Pat's lips.

"Go out of my house, Pat Ryan!" she said, pointing to the door.

The little woman's wrath made her majestic, though she was helpless to do anything but lie still on her sofa.

"What's the matter with the woman, at all?" Pat Ryan muttered in stupefaction. "Does she think 'tis humbuggin' I am? I'm in earnest, Mrs. O'Donoghue."

"God help me," she said, "that has to lie here, and look at you! My beautiful Meg, as proud and handsome a girl as ever stepped—my girl that I made a lady of, and your Tony! Will you be going, or must I call some of the men to turn you out of it?"

"Why, 'tis mad you are, ma'am," said Pat Ryan,

retreating a step or two, "stark, starin' mad. Or is it the joy that's on you?"

"Bridget Cormack!" called Mrs. O'Donoghue.

Bridget put her head in at the door with suspicious quickness; her freckled face wore an air of great enjoyment.

"Tell a couple of the men to come here," her mistress said, "and take this man out of my house. And tell them, when he's going, to throw a bucket of dirty water over him."

"I won't wait for it," said Pat, sardonically. "The company of a mad woman's not that pleasant."

"You'd better be off, Mr. Ryan," said Bridget. "The water in the trough's terrible dirty, an' the duck-pond's as green as grass. 'Twould be a choice between the two o' them."

Pat picked up his caubeen, and, with a malignant glance backward, left the enemy in possession of the field.

CHAPTER XII.

AN INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE.

"I CAN hardly believe you are really here at last," said Mabel Egerton, for about the tenth time.

Her friend, Laura St. Victor, had arrived at Killylea the evening before. They were standing in the bright tower-room, which had been allotted to the visitor, and all around them, heaped on every article of furniture, were billowy masses of silks and laces, chiffons and muslins—enough to stock a Paris shop.

"But you should not have brought these—indeed, you should not," she went on. "I told you it would be an absolute hermitage; there is no one to dress for."

"There is you, *chérie*. And Antoinette packs to perfection; nothing gets rumpled with her—besides, one never knows but the occasion might arise."

"You will be able to endure it, Laura—the loneliness, I mean?"

"There is none—with you, the friend of my soul, and the charming Clare, and your M. Gervase. Company is not in numbers."

"Ah, but Gervase is out so much. He works hard—harder than the lazy farmers about here. He will be at our service if we want him; but he is not like the men we are used to, who have nothing to do all day long."

A shadow of dismay passed swiftly across the French girl's handsome, clever face.

"Ah, but he is industrious, this M. Gervase of yours. Well, then, shall we not explore this beautiful country, make *villégiature*, row on the river, you and I have what you call the picnic? Shall we not, *ma mie*? So I shall be quite happy."

"Laura, how sweet you are! I believe you keep your sweetest aspects for me. And yet I have seen you so different."

"Where I am not liked and trusted—as, for example, with your M. Roger Fry."

Mabel Egerton looked scared for an instant.

"Don't say 'your,' Laura," she said, "as if—as if Mr. Fry were—were Gervase."

"He does not need to be M. Gervase to be yours, *ma belle*. That you should be his—that is quite another matter, I allow. What does the poet say? 'The moon looks on many brooks, the brook sees but one moon.' Or was it a poet? *N'importe!* I must ask the little Paul de Neuville, who is a poet himself. But, frankly, this M. Fry—he is pleasant, handsome, honest, though he does not like me. Not like your Capitaine, of course. Still——"

She broke off expressively, watching the younger girl out of her long, shrewd eyes. Mademoiselle Laura's face was an attractive one, though it had not the simplicity of youth. She was a very charming and saucy-looking brunette, with waving brown hair parted each side of very bright eyes, with white teeth and comely brown skin, and the air of a born Parisienne.

"Mr. Fry is only a boy," said Mabel, with the same startled air; "he is afraid of you, Laura."

"Perhaps he is a little jealous of your poor friend."

Mabel Egerton blushed hotly. "He knows I am engaged to Gervase," she said.

"Ah, poor youth!—that will not prevent him. M. Gervase, he is everything to you, it goes without saying?"

Mabel Egerton looked up innocently. "Frankly, Laura, he is a thousand times too good for me. Since I was a little child I have looked upon Gervase as a hero of romance. When I used to read about knights and crusaders, I always thought of them as looking like Gervase; I suppose that was how I first came to—to care for him."

"And he?"

"He! I don't know how it came about with him. Why should he have cared, Laura?"

"I don't know, my kitten. He is perhaps strange, eccentric."

"I am only afraid he will find out some day that I am worldly and frivolous, and will be disappointed in me. Sometimes I seem to rise up to what I know he believes of me; then again I am my real self, and little and poor and foolish as I know myself."

"It must be wearisome to try to keep on tiptoe. I suppose it is the attitude of lovers."

"Is it, Laura?"

"I do not know; I think I am destined to *coiffer*

St. Catharine. For myself, I should prefer to be the divinity."

"Really, Laura?"

"As you are to that pretty Monsieur Fry."

"He is a foolish boy"—with a frown.

"You seemed to enjoy his adoration—at Ascot, was it not? How brilliant you looked! I could not realize the country maiden of to-day."

"Ah!"—a long sigh—"the Cup day! It was a delicious day."

"Fie, then. And how about the chivalric M. Gervase? Is it that the *fiancée* enjoys herself in his absence?"

"Why, yes, Laura; I can't help it. Gervase enjoys himself without me, in his quiet way, be sure; he would not have me mope."

"I don't pretend to understand you sad islanders; you are bad lovers."

"We are so many other things, Laura. Love is not everything; there is friendship."

"So there is in France, when we are no longer young. Ah, yes; the friendships are pleasant if they content one! You will make this M. Fry happy, then, with friendship?"

"I was not thinking of him"—vexedly. "He is a foolish boy; I was thinking rather of Gervase."

"Has *he*, then, friendships?"

Mabel Egerton had no eye for the cynicism, carefully disguised, in her friend's expression.

"He has a great friend here—a lady. Yes; I am sure she is a lady, though she is only the daughter of one of Gervase's tenants. She is a great farmer; manages everything for herself just like a man, goes to fairs and markets, buys and sells cattle."

"In short, a man-woman—a monster."

"No, indeed, Laura; but a very handsome girl. We were all struck with her when we saw her first at church; since then, she has grown even handsomer. There is something splendid about her; the daughter of Ceres, Cousin Toby calls her—Ceres, you know, is the goddess of harvest."

"I remember my Lemprière; my school-days are not so long over."

"I beg your pardon, Laura. You are, of course, a thousand times cleverer than I."

"Not so, *ma petite*. But this corn-goddess?"

"You shall see her as we drive about. She is golden-fair, as though the sun had ripened her. The life has not roughened her a bit, as it might some women — only made her freer and finer looking."

"A Diana. A virgin huntress."

"Something like that. I often see her in the distance standing among her sheep talking to one of her labourers, or moving here and there among her cattle, or walking on an upland against the sky, thinking, no doubt, about something quite prosaic, but looking lonely and splendid."

"And her farming? Is it that she only looks the part?"

"How cynical of you, Laura! No; Gervase says she is a born farmer, and would not be happy at anything else. She amazes them here in this ignorant, primitive little place — of course, every one said she would be cheated, and generally made a fool of, but she has proved otherwise."

"How much you know of her, *ma mie!*"

"Gervase has told me. I should love to know her; but, apparently, she doesn't reciprocate the wish. She looks upon herself as a working woman,

and has no time for a fine lady, such as she considers me."

"She does not object to M. Gervase?"

"Gervase is a working man; she is his great friend. They talk by the hour of their common interests—of bone manure, no doubt, or the newest reaper."

She broke off with a little laugh.

"Ah, you think so," said the French girl. "They talk only—of those abominations."

"Of what else? They are a pair of farmers together."

"You know your country-people. I—I should be jealous."

"I couldn't be jealous—it is too vulgar. And of Gervase!"

"Ah, you misunderstand. It is only that I should want to be everything; that I should not want any one else to be something I was not."

Mabel's face cleared, and she laughed.

"You greedy Laura!" she said. "How exacting you would be!"

"Which is, perhaps, why I am destined for—what do you call it?—the old maiden state."

"You are as little like an old maid as any one I can imagine—you clever, handsome, charming Laura."

Mademoiselle St. Victor kissed her friend with something of real feeling.

"And you will be content with the sweets of the country all your life?" she asked, after a pause.

"I'm afraid I must. I don't think Gervase will give me many London seasons."

"Then you must enjoy yourself while you can—till you are Madame. M Gervase does not forbid that?"

"Gervase forbids nothing. I shall be here all the summer. In the autumn I go to Scotland with my Aunt Dufresne to stay at—one or two houses."

The French girl noticed the pause, but refrained from comment.

"Now that my brother is married, I am a wanderer. I have the independent ideas of your English girls. I think I shall join a friend of mine, an American, in London; and we two women shall set up housekeeping together."

"Oh, Laura, how lovely! I wish it might be I."

"You have a fairer destiny, *ma belle*. But, by the way, you have an old schoolfellow of mine somewhere in this neighbourhood. Is she within reach? She is the intimate and beloved friend of the young Madame St. Victor, my dear sister-in-law. Myself, I know her little, but I am charged by Germaine to see her."

"Why, you were at St. Cyprian's, Laura. How stupid I am! This girl I have been talking about, Miss O'Donoghue, must be your schoolfellow!"

"Ah!"—with a shriek of delight—"the adorable Meg! Don't ask me to remember the other barbarous name. So it is Meg, the golden Meg, who is your daughter of Ceres. How glad I shall be to see her! And when will you bring about a meeting, kitten?"

"I must ask Gervase. She is busy, you see; it must be when she is free to receive us."

"Let us find her as she is—at work in the fields. I want to see her in her surroundings."

"But it may be an intrusion, Laura."

"I shall not be an intruder—her old schoolfellow, and with messages from Germaine. Let it be at once—this afternoon, now."

"It had better be this afternoon, then, if you think really it will not be an intrusion. Gervase is gone to a fair at Rathmullan. She, no doubt, too, will be there, and will return home in the afternoon. We might happen to find her."

"We shall try, then!" cried Mademoiselle, excitedly. "I long to see her, *la belle* Meg. She seems to come out of the shadows now, as I think about her, a little one in a black frock with a decoration pinned on it."

"There is the lunch bell," said Mabel, as a gong clanged through the tower. "I am going to wash my hands, and will come back for you."

"Very well, *ma mie*; I have enjoyed our talk."

Still Mademoiselle, as she arranged her hair at the glass, yawned as if the day were long.

"How should I support it," she said to herself, "day after day, if there were not this little drama? She would be happier with the Fry boy, ten thousand times; and I could come and go. For the aversion of a boy like that—bah! I snap my fingers at it. And the handsome M. Gervase. If he had but a little money, and were not industrious! But there, I must have no preferences—I, Laura St. Victor,

twenty-six, unmarried and homeless. And meanwhile, while I make my campaign, I must have my *pied-à-terre*. The Fry palace; 'tis better than Killylea—ruinous, moth-eaten! And yet I detest this Meg girl beforehand—though she is to be useful. I don't suppose he will marry her, after all. He is too proud——”

“Ah, *ma belle*,” as her friend entered the room, “I have been thinking how pleasant it is here—after Paris, after London, after the glare, the glitter, the modernity—this peace of the fields. I am a born countrywoman.”

She burst into laughter at the comical disclaimer in Mabel's face.

“Well, perhaps I am not. But does a countrywoman ever feel the spells of the country—the fascination—like her town sister fresh from the whirlpool?”

CHAPTER XIII.

MADEMOISELLE.

So it was that Meg, coming in tired from her fair, was intercepted by Bridget with the tale of the visitors awaiting her.

"They're talkin' to the mistress in the parlour," she said, "an' herself plased as Punch with the foreign madam that's clatterin' away sixteen to the dozen. Her tongue's longer nor the clapper of a bell, an' her eyes is everywhere at wance; 'tisin't much that's goin' on *she'll* miss. And the little boots of her for trapesin' through the woods—after all the wet weather, too! 'Twould be a charity to offer her the mistress's ould brogues to go back in."

Meg looked down at her own strongly-shod feet with an involuntary gesture of distaste. Her stout serge skirt was spattered with mud, and she felt altogether tired, dishevelled, and dirty. For a second

her thoughts went longingly to her French prints and muslins reposing, cool and dainty, with lavender bags in their folds upstairs. Then she shook her head sternly and went in to her visitors.

Mademoiselle St. Victor, for some reason or other, had put on one of her most striking toilettes, the simple distinction of which impressed you like the odour of violets, while you wondered how the effect was come at. She looked almost startlingly elegant, standing there in the low, dim room. It was a gown designed rather for a garden-party than for this quiet lonely country; and only this morning she had regretted bringing it. Now she was rejoiced that she had worn it, as she noticed Meg's spattered skirt, and the painful flush with which she entered the room.

Meg shrank a little as Mademoiselle came forward with an eager little rush, and, gathering her into a soft, scented embrace, saluted her on both cheeks.

"It is Meg," purred Mademoiselle, in an ecstasy—"Meg, the little Meg of old, though grown out of recognition. I have brought my friend, Mabel Egerton, to see you."

The two girls bowed silently.

"She tells me that you are a recluse—will see no one. 'Ah!' cried I, 'but she will see me, her old schoolfellow, reminding her of St. Cyprian's, straight from France, where so much of her heart is!' I was right, was I not, Meg? I may come? I may bring my friend? I am welcome—is it not so?"

"You are welcome," said Meg, unsmilingly.

Her cold aspect stirred her mother to sudden anger.

"Of course she is glad to see you, Mademoiselle. And if she shuts herself up, 'tis her fault entirely. Indeed, I never wanted that she should do what she's doing. I'd never have sent her to St. Cyprian's if I could have foreseen it. And, of course, 'tis proud she is to receive yourself and Miss Egerton."

Meg winced at the speech, and Mabel Egerton fidgeted inwardly in sympathy; but Mademoiselle went on easily, as if she did not feel the awkwardness—

"I am so glad to see you, Meg, amid your country surroundings, in your daily life. When I return, Germaine will fly to me. 'Tell me,' she will cry, 'about my friend, my Meg.' And I will tell her all: how you looked, how you spoke, of your

delightful life in the fields with Nature, so refreshing to poor worldlings."

"Germaine knows," said Meg, recovering herself at the sound of the beloved name; "I tell her everything." And for the moment she forgot her stout, muddy boots and the spattered skirt by the magic of the talismanic name.

But Mabel, sitting by silently, was vexed with Laura. Something in the fluent speeches struck her as insincere and designed to wound; and her sympathy turned from the friend so greatly admired to the cold, quiet girl in whose face intellect and simplicity mixed, and who seemed to endure Mademoiselle rather than reciprocate her raptures.

"You're not going out again, Meg?" asked Mrs. O'Donoghue, with a querulous intonation in her speech.

"I shall have to, later," replied Meg, in a low voice.

"Indeed, then, I wish you'd make up your mind to have your tea comfortably. Run upstairs and change, do; Lacy can do anything you want later on."

"Lacy cannot," said Meg, with an obstinacy

foreign to her. "I have to pick the cattle for the market; it would only mean changing again."

"The dear knows you might do that to please me," grumbled Mrs. O'Donoghue, who, poor woman, was painfully sensible of the difference between her Meg and these dainty ladies.

But Meg said nothing; only turned, with a shadow on her face, to pour out the tea.

"What delicious tea!" went on Mademoiselle, bridging over the awkward pause. "And what cups!—a dream! How fortunate you are to have such china to drink from!"

"'Tis pretty," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, well pleased. "'Twas my mother's before me, and hers before her, and goodness knows how many generations before that owned the same china."

"Ah, yes," said Mademoiselle, "I have heard that you must seek such treasures in the farmhouses; the landed gentry have had theirs disposed of by auction long ago. Is it not so?"

"In this country," broke in Mabel Egerton, hastily, "there have been such vicissitudes of families that one never knows how often things may have changed hands. That tower I showed you on the

lake, Laura, belonged to an ancestor of Miss O'Donoghue, a very powerful chieftain in old days."

"The O'Donoghues," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, with simple pride, "owned all the countryside."

"And the Fitzmaurices?" asked Mademoiselle.

"The Fitzmaurice of that day was a marauding trooper," said Mabel Egerton. "However, they have become of the land and the people long ago. You forgive the Fitzmaurices, Mrs. O'Donoghue?"

"Oh, the dear knows I do," said the good woman, seriously. "Whatever there was in old days, 'tis long since the O'Donoghues owed the Fitzmaurices anything but kindness."

"That is good," said Mademoiselle, with the faintest suspicion of a sneer. "And here, at a fortunate moment, comes the Fitzmaurice of the day himself!"

She had caught sight of Gervase Fitzmaurice striding through the garden beds, entering the house by a back way as though he were used to being an unceremonious visitor. He looked pleased to find his cousin and her guest.

"Well," he said, looking from Mabel to Meg

O'Donoghue ; "so the introduction is accomplished which I have long wished to bring about." And one could hardly say at which girl he looked the more kindly. Mademoiselle, watching him with her eyes narrowed, could not, and muttered to herself for the hundredth time of the incomprehensibility of these islanders.

"I would have Mabel come," she said aloud. "As soon as I discover that my old schoolfellow, Meg, is near, I am all impetuosity to fly, to embrace her, to talk of the schooldays. We thought to surprise you, not knowing you would discover, and seek us here."

"I didn't know you were here, Mademoiselle," said the Captain, bluntly. "I came to see Miss O'Donoghue."

"Ah, these islanders," thought Mademoiselle again.

"I oughtn't to spoil afternoon tea with business matters," he said ; "but, Miss Meg, if you would like to sell those lambs to me—I saw your man driving them back from the fair—I'll give you your price one . them."

chang^g. Then," cried Mademoiselle, with a little shriek,

"let us go, Mabel; we are out of place in this matter of buying and selling."

Her smile was brilliant as she flashed it round on the party, but Mabel answered her unwillingly.

"If you wish, Laura; but I do not mind. It is Gervase's business, and I am used to it."

Mademoiselle fluttered up with a frou-frouing of all her flounces.

"I shall tell Germaine," she said, making playful farewells, "that I found you selling cattle over a cup of afternoon tea. And the romantic Paul—what will he think of you, so severe, so practical-minded? I will tell him, also, how your pastures become you."

And so she floated away amid a cloud of gay impertinences, cleverly wrapped up in compliments which deceived no one but poor Mrs. O'Donoghue.

"That's a pretty, pleasant-spoken creature," she said. And then, seeing that neither her daughter nor Captain Fitzmaurice hurried to agree with her, her ever-ready irritation against Meg stirred in her. "I wish you were more like her, Meg," she said.

Meg said nothing, but Captain Fitzmaurice took up the challenge.

"No doubt Mademoiselle wouldn't mind being like Miss Meg," he said good-humouredly. "And, by all accounts, Miss Meg is the image of what you were yourself at her age, Mrs. O'Donoghue, except for height, and, as Bridget says, 'no one could bate you for looks.'"

The compliment disarmed Mrs. O'Donoghue.

"Ah, sure 'tis yourself is soft-spoken, Captain," she said, laughing.

But Meg, lifting her eyes from their shadow, sent him a look of gratitude that almost took away his breath. It was not the first time he had turned her mother's displeasure from her.

Meanwhile Mabel Egerton and her friend had passed out by the white gate, where an urchin was holding the Captain's horse, and had walked down by the grassy breen to where a gate gave on the wood-path.

"You bewildered the girl with your ways, Laura," Mabel Egerton said vexedly; "she is simple, though she is so clever. Why did you put on that manner to her?"

"What manner, little friend?"

"You know you meant it. It was a manner

you neyer would have used to an equal, or to any one you did not design to wound—yes, though all the time you were shrieking over your Meg, your old school-friend.”

Mabel’s unconscious imitation of Mademoiselle was excellent, and stirred at once appreciation and indignation in the heart of the French girl, who had a keen sense of humour.

“But,” she gasped, “what plain speaking! My heaven, what frankness!”

“‘Brutal frankness,’ you want to say, Laura, only you would never say it.”

“If you had not said it, *ma petite*.”

“It was not like you, as I know you.”

“Perhaps you do not know me”—with cynical truth.

“I like her, Laura; I admire her, and wanted to make friends with her, but you kept me in torture by the things you were saying.”

“And you snapped at your friend like a spitfire.”

“Forgive me, but you seemed so unkind. And she was so incapable of meeting you with your own weapons, though I saw her eyes flash.”

“Bah! I was impertinent, I admit it. I do not

like her—this Meg. And she stood there to take my little shafts—like one of her own sheep, is it not ?”

“I shouldn’t say so. Too grave, too noble and simple to know how to repel them rather. Do you suppose the mountains and the fields gave her that air of grandeur ?”

“I do not know,” said Mademoiselle, yawning. “I am tired of grandeurs. She is burnt black.”


“But the sunburn becomes her.”

“Perhaps”—with an ostentatious yawn. But Mabel would not take the hint.

“What did you mean about ‘the romantic Paul,’ as you called him, Laura ? She looked as if you had struck her, when you said that.”

“She did not like it to be said before—before her mother, perhaps. It is Paul de Neuville—the little Paul, the adored of his family. He is in love with her, head over ears. I was in the house with him three weeks, and when I had taken trouble to please him—figure to yourself—he raved to me of this Meg ! Read to me his sonnets to her golden eyes ! Ah !”

Mademoiselle’s long-drawn-out “Ah !” was so expressive of disgust that Mabel burst out laughing.



“Poor Laura! you who are accustomed to make men lovers.”

“But not husbands, *petite*,” said Mademoiselle, with a flash of her cynical honesty.

“And is she engaged to this Paul?”

“But no! What a *mésalliance* for a de Neuville! Yet I do not say that she might not be if she would. My dear sister-in-law adores her; she is of another world, unpractical, in the clouds. And the Vicomte is very old; he would, perhaps, accept this Meg’s shadowy pedigree, as you seem to do.”

“Meg and a French poet. I do not quite seem to see it. She ought to have some one brave, strong, handsome—like herself.”

“Ah, but where is such a one?” asked Mademoiselle, with her characteristic side-glance at her companion.

CHAPTER XIV.

TONY TRIES HIS LUCK.

MRS. O'DONOGHUE kept her own counsel about Pat Ryan's visit and its purport.

"I'd as soon slap my Meg across the face as tell her that any one ever thought of the like," she said to herself; and, suspecting that Bridget Cormack might guess the reason of her anger against Pat that day, she made various remarks to her, transparently intended to be misleading.

However, she needn't have been afraid of Bridget. Bridget's wide mouth might widen to the fullest extent when she thought over "ould Pat's" ignominious flight that day; she might enjoy a good chuckle to herself at how much more she knew than her mistress suspected. But she appreciated Mrs. O'Donoghue's reason for silence, all the time, and shared in her indignation loyally.

“If the mistress hadn’t done as she did,” she said, ‘upon my word I’d have hit him a welt of a dish-cloth as he went by the kitchen door, and pretended it was them thievin’ fowl I was throwin’ it at.”

So Meg was blissfully unconscious that her hand had been asked in marriage; and, mentally resolving not to accept the Ryans’ hospitality again, had put Tony and his attentions behind her like a horrid dream.


A week, two weeks, passed from the time of Miss Egerton’s visit, and Meg had not returned the call. She had no intention of not returning it; she had been taught better manners than that. But she did not mean that Kilylea should see very much of her, and, by delaying, she had a vague hope that she might be spared the mortification of meeting Mdlle. St. Victor again. It would be different with Miss Egerton and the saintly-faced Miss Fitzmaurice. But the French girl had found out Meg’s raw places, and had shot her little poisoned arrows at them with an unflinching aim.

It was a day when Meg’s milking-cows had gone to grass. The hay-making had begun, and all over the country the mowing-machine was humming,

as much a familiar sound of the summer as the saw of the corn-crake and the buzzing of many bees.

It was very hot. Meg had discarded her home-spun for a holland frock. Her wide straw hat had a trail of roses across the brim; she had had a struggle with herself when she trimmed it, for she was used to take a too austere view of what suited her occupation and what did not. Finally she had dropped them there in trailing elegance, feeling herself something of a backslider, with the excuse that they were Germaine's roses, and going to waste. And, after all, had not Nature flung her wild roses lavishly on every hedgerow in the country-side; and why should not she, the daughter of the fields, take a leaf from Nature's book?

She was certainly looking her handsomest. The sun had not scorched, but only ripened her; and her apricot fairness, with the rich colour in her cheeks, could hardly have had a better setting than the holland frock. Those hollands, with their girdles of soft, flowered silk, were an offence to Judy Ryan whenever she caught sight of Meg; they couldn't have cost a pound altogether, yet no matter how



much she spent on her girls' frocks, they could never attain that offensive elegance which Judy described as "peacockery." Needless to say, within the last week or two, Mrs. Ryan's dislike of Meg had revived with more than its first ardour.

It was the dinner-hour, and the mowers had retired to the shade of the hedges to enjoy their frugal meal of bread and cold tea. Meg had turned homeward: the meadow was not far from the house, and it was long enough since breakfast for her to enjoy her midday dinner. Six o'clock had seen her afoot after a breakfast of stirabout, new-laid eggs, bread-and-butter and tea, which would have astonished the town-bred girl. Meg had discovered the sweets of the working woman's life, in her superb health, her delightful appetite, her delicious hours of sleep.

As she turned down the long, hilly road from the meadow some one, who apparently had been waiting for her, stepped from behind a tree. An odour of rank tobacco, badly disguised by patchouli, accompanied the person like a garment, destroying as it came the delicate fresh fragrance of the meadows and the hedgerows. It was Tony Ryan, very smart in a new

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tweed suit of somewhat staring pattern, a tie blue as his eyes, and a rose in his coat.

"I thought you'd never come," he said, with an ingratiating smile and a pretence at ease he was far from feeling.

Meg stared at him too dismayed to speak.

"Now you've come," he went on, "you were worth waitin' for. You look as fresh as a rose in June."

Meg bowed haughtily.


"You will excuse me, Mr. Ryan," she said. "I am on my way home, and I've a good deal of business to attend to."

"You wouldn't be so hard-hearted as to run away from me, and I after waitin' for you the better part of an hour?"

"I'm afraid I must," she said, making a movement to pass on.

"I've got somethin' to say to you," he said imploringly, "that you must listen to. Don't be in such a hurry to be gone!—other things can wait better than my business."

Something in his manner touched the generous softness in Meg's heart.



"What is it?" she said gently. "I can spare time to listen to you."

"It's—— They've been tellin' you somethin' about me and little Molly Gleeson."

Meg looked full at him. She expected a smirk of self-complacency. To her surprise it did not come; but instead, his eyes fell and the red of his cheeks became deeper.

"There's nothin' in it," he said. "She's a good little girl—good enough and pretty enough for any man; but there's nothin' in it."

"Why should you tell me this?"

"Because when I heard how that old fool of a father of mine had been pokin' his nose into my business, and goin' match-makin' for me behind my back, and how your mother showed him the door, I guessed some one had been makin' mischief between us."

"Your father! My mother showed him the door! What on earth are you talking about?" asked Meg, with the frank directness of amazement.

"You thought he wouldn't tell us? He didn't tell me: he knew better than that; but he couldn't keep it from my mother, and I can get anythin' out

of her. I let him have it hot. 'Tis the last time he'll interfere with my business."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You don't mean to say you don't know. You're not puttin' it on? If you were another girl I'd know you were only lettin' on by way of bashfulness; but you're different."

Meg sighed impatiently.


"You're talking riddles to me," she said; "and I'll say good-morning, Mr. Ryan."

She started to walk away from him, but he was beside her in an instant.

"I think I see now what you mean," he said; "you expect me to do my own courtin', and I'm of the same mind. I dare say your mother thought the same, and that's why she gave the old chap lamb and salad. I didn't think she could really object to me as a son-in-law."

His conceit was coming back, and with it Meg's amazed disgust.

"So far as I understand you," she said, "your father has done me the honour to make a proposal for my hand to my mother. It is the first I have heard of it. My mother guessed, no doubt, that it



would be disagreeable to me, and so kept silence about it. I wish you had accepted her refusal; but, since you would not, permit me for my own part to say 'No,' Mr. Ryan—— ”

“ Don't say it yet,” he cried imploringly; “ you haven't thought about it. You don't know how much there is to come to me in land and money and cattle.”

He stood barring her way, and she did not know how to pass him.

“ All that does not matter at all,” she said, looking vainly for a means of escape.

“ There isn't a girl in the country that wouldn't jump at me. You saw yourself how they were after me like bees after sugar.”

Meg's lips tightened.

“ It isn't little Molly ? ”

She shook her head.

“ Nor my mother ? She has a sharp tongue in her head ; I could make it civil.”

Again she shook her head.

“ You can't dislike me for myself. I know I was always a bit of a roamer, but you'd find me tied fast enough to your apron-strings. I'd be fond and faithful enough—to you.”

With a fierce gesture of dislike she put out both her hands and pushed him from her path.

"No," he said, catching her skirt, "you won't go till you tell me what's wrong with me; there can be nothin' wrong past mendin'. I never seen any girl like you; I'll do anything you want, anything in the world, but don't refuse me."

He had pushed back his hat in a most undignified fashion on his curly head. His forehead was moist; he panted as he spoke. Meg's dislike of him was suddenly tinged with fear.

She wrenched her skirt from his grip. He still barred her way.

"Let me pass!" she said imperiously.

His eyes leaped at her. "Not till you've told me what's the matter with me, so that I may mend it," he replied doggedly.

She felt the indignity, almost the absurdity, of her position. Her own men were but a field away, but to call for help would manifestly be absurd—and worse than absurd. It would make a horrid little country scandal if it were known that the violence of Tony Ryan's love-making had driven her to call for help. She shuddered as she thought of where

the story might penetrate. Her momentary fear of him had passed; she saw him as he was—a harmless fellow enough, as incapable as most of his countrymen of offering violence to a woman; that, indeed, had not entered her thoughts. It was only that something, something in her own heart, made Tony Ryan's passion shocking, intolerable.

Suddenly her eyes blazed at him. "Go!" she said. "How dare you keep me! Never attempt to speak to me again."

Tony fell back dismayed, and she flew by him; it was an entire reversal of the position. He stared after her stupidly. There was a tall figure coming up the lane towards her; it was Captain Fitzmaurice. As they met he turned round and walked by her side.

"Aye," said Tony to himself, "so that's the reason why. It's no wonder she despises me."

His face fell in a dejection and humiliation that suddenly revealed what Maria Hevey had guessed that the unspoilt Tony might have been. The tears filled his eyes; he had always had everything he wanted—he had never wanted anything so much in his life before as Meg, and now he could not

have her. He ground his teeth as he turned and walked away, muttering some unpleasant things to himself. Yet there was a dawning distrust of his own charms, an involuntary comparison of himself with Fitzmaurice and his generations of breeding and traditional ideal of conduct, that perhaps promised well for the redemption of Tony after all.

"Who was that you were talking to?" Fitzmaurice asked, walking by Meg's side as if it was the most natural thing in the world. His voice was suspicious and resentful.

"It was — another tenant of yours, Mr. Tony Ryan of Inch."

Tears of mortification filled her eyes. She had no hope now of keeping from Captain Fitzmaurice the detestable fact of Tony's having dared to make love to her.

"What was he saying to you? I had an idea, for a minute, that he was detaining you against your will; but of course that couldn't be."

Meg's tears overflowed. "He was detaining me," she said.

"He—frightened you?"

There was a cloud like thunder on Fitzmaurice's

brow ; and, pulling himself up short, he half-turned round the way Tony had gone.

"He didn't mean to be rude," said Meg, imploringly. "On the contrary, he thought he was being very civil."

"If he had been rude to you he would have answered to me for it. What did he want of you ?"

"I had rather not tell you, Captain Fitzmaurice."

"Tell me, or—he will tell me."

She obeyed him as though his will constrained her.

"He was telling me—what I had no suspicion of"—she laughed nervously, though the unaccustomed tears were on her cheeks,—“that his father had gone match-making to my mother for—for him, and been rejected."

"The brute dared to tell you that !"

"He thought it was a great compliment."

"And he forced you to listen to him ?"

Meg looked at him. It pleased her oddly to see the change in the grave, composed face she had always known. This was the face of a fighting-man. She wondered curiously whether he had looked so that time for which he had been mentioned in

despatches in the old fighting-days on the Indian frontier.

"He did not mean to be rude," she assured him.

"I want to kill him all the same," he said deliberately.

"Ah, that would be too much," she said, almost gaily. "After all, if I meet him as an equal, how is he to know that—that—the other thing is an insult?"

"It is my own fault," he said, scowling darkly. "I encouraged you in this scheme of yours which brought you into association with such people. I helped to make your mother give her consent. Now"—he flung out his hands with a gesture of helplessness—"I am powerless to save you from the consequences."

"They are not very serious, after all; and I can defend myself."

"Ah, I know," he said. "I must not defend you as I would; it is a little, tattling place. What talk it would make if I were to do what I want to do, and that is, to kick the brute!"

"That would not be kind at all," she said.

"Do you think I don't know it, Meg?" He was

quite unconscious of having used her name, but she flushed deeply and then turned pale. "It is so difficult for a man to be a woman's friend in a matter like this; he has to stand aside."

"He has to stand aside," she repeated.

"Yet, if this were to happen again—it had better not happen again,—you will not put yourself in the way of it?"

"I shall certainly give Inch a wide berth."

"There are other friends waiting you—my sister, my ward."

He stopped and looked at her irresolutely. Then his lips set themselves in a straight line; his eyes looked before him, and they had the expression of one who sees a hard thing and faces it.

"You and Mabel must be friends. Do you know that Mabel has promised to marry me?"

She did not wince; instead, her face grew quiet and kind.

"I guessed as much," she said, putting out a frank hand; "but I have wanted you to tell me yourself, so that I might wish you joy. She is—lovely."

His hand closed on hers in a strong grasp.

"She is a thousand times too good for me," he said. "And you will make friends with her?"

"I could come to see her to-morrow afternoon, if she will be at home."

"I am sure she will be, for you. But—I am forgetting my business; I came to say that you can have my float on Thursday night, and welcome, if you want to send your pigs to the market."

"Ah, thank you. That is a weight off my mind; I didn't know how I should get them in. Won't you come in and see my mother?"

"Thank you, not to-day, I think; I am just going home to lunch. Let me know if that fellow annoys you again; I may not be able to do as I would with him, but something must be done to prevent it."

"I don't think he will trouble me any more, thank you," she said.

After all, what could Miss Egerton's lover do to protect Meg O'Donoghue from the attentions of other men?

CHAPTER XV.

THE WORLD AND THE SPIRIT.

It was again the Meg of the Chateau de Neuville who sat in the drawing-room at Killylea facing the malicious eyes of Mademoiselle St. Victor.

“The creature has elegance,” said Mademoiselle Laura to herself; “and—yes—she has good looks. Nothing is gained, my Laura, by concealing from thyself a matter which so palpably jumps to the eye. Yet—the impossible mother, the little farmhouse; it is a gulf he will not cross. Who knows but that when the little Mabelle shall at last have been won from her loyalty, who knows but that——”

Even to her own mind she did not finish the speech.

Clare Fitzmaurice, presiding at her tea-table, sent benevolent looks across at Meg. Miss Fitzmaurice was no longer a young woman; she would never

see forty again ; but her beauty of perfectly chiselled features, large rapt eyes, and pale clearness of colour did not depend on youth. Indeed, some people said that a face too cold in youth had gained by the calm and benignity of middle age.

"How long it was before you would come!" she said reproachfully. "I wanted to come to you long ago, but my brother always said you were too busy."

"I am a working woman," Meg reminded her, with a smile.

"Ah, that makes it so good of you to give us even this time. Still, you must not work too hard ; it is not good for human nature, and you are young."

"And the change here is so good for you, so absolutely of a change ; so unlike your everyday life, all you are vowed to, my little Meg," purred Mademoiselle Laura.

"You don't know what a pleasure you have deprived me of," Miss Fitzmaurice went on, hardly hearing or heeding the French girl's impertinence. If she had noticed it she would have thought that Laura's expression was limited because of her little knowledge of English.

But Mabel Egerton knew better, and cast about



her for some means of taking Laura away. She would not commit again the error of drawing attention to Laura's bitter speeches by openly championing their object.

"There is so much you can tell me about the dear Sisters; you were years after me, of course, but you know many I knew. Mère Angélique writes to me still, but she has not the gift of letter-writing, or she thinks it too little of the spirit. I commend her to the example of St. Teresa, a delightful letter-writer, but she will not heed me."

"Convent letters," said Mademoiselle Laura, who was in one of the cynical moods wherein she forgot to be prudent, "weary me to death. At St. Cyprian's I was like the others; I had my sentimentalities for the Sisters; I vowed eternal friendship with *les demoiselles* because I am compliant—what you call 'all things to all men.' Yet, I knew very well all the time, that as soon as I return to Paris—pouf! the pretty things will all be forgotten. I know not one name hardly from the other in twenty-four hours."

Mabel Egerton laughed. She did not approve of her friend in this mood, but she could not help

being amused ; and she was beginning to think that it was the mood in which, after all, the true Laura showed herself without fear or favour. She had learned of late to distrust Laura when she was sugary.


"Your memory must be very bad," said Clare Fitzmaurice, simply ; "I always remember names and faces. You should adopt a system."

"*Mon Dieu*, but what is a system ?" asked Mademoiselle, staring. "And why should I adopt it ?"

"I shall lend you a little book about it."

Clare Fitzmaurice was obviously not interested in the French girl, and returned to Meg immediately. She had finished her labours at the tea-tray now, and had taken a seat on the roomy couch beside Meg.

"Tell me how Mère Angélique looks," she said. "Is she much older ? She is Bursar now, and her hands are full of cares—I used to think that nuns never wrinkled. And Mère Saint Esprit—she is Mistress of Schools, is she not ? What is Mère Alacoque doing ? Is she yet Mistress of Novices ? This naughty Mademoiselle Laura could tell me nothing, although I had imagined myself living my schooldays over again when she came."



Mademoiselle Laura smiled.

"It is my misfortune of the memory, I suppose, that I never know one nun from another. I never did then, though I had the wit to deceive. Bah, there is nothing in those smooth faces, no history—not a line. They are as dull as, as *les enfants*. Truly I would have remembered for you, Mademoiselle Clare, if I could."

Clare's charity excused the hardness in Mademoiselle's speech. It was only the strange tongue, she assured herself, that made possible this terrible plain speaking. Had she not seen Mademoiselle lift a peasant child, angelically coloured under a layer of dirt, and kiss it in a beautiful forgetfulness of the grime, the other day, when they were out with Gervase? Was not that proof positive that Laura's speech was not to be taken literally?

"Mère Angélique was always my adored," Clare went on, "though I was very fond of all the Sisters, and of many of my dear schoolfellows. Gabrielle de Frontenac, she entered afterwards; and Joséphine Lalauze. You would know them as Sisters. I always think of them in the dear blue frocks, the little black aprons, the medal on the breast."

"So innocent," sighed Mademoiselle Laura. "We all looked the same—like sheep. It was the age of—what do you call it?—ungracefulness. It set me to marvel at our ugliness when I look around. How did they accomplish it, *les Sœurs*? Was it the little blue frock or the black apron, or the hair so smoothed?"

Mademoiselle took two of her crinkled bands of hair and laid them smooth each side her forehead, elongating her face to an incredible dulness, at which even Meg smiled.

"It is the dowdiness of the provinces," she went on, seeing that some of her audience appreciated this bit of mimicry and exhilarated by the appreciation. "We were provincial, we little ones—and lumpish. *Ciel!* we were lumpish, though some of us have since taken Paris by storm. We might have been the daughters of grocers, instead of noble demoiselles. Was it not so, Meg?"

Nothing could have been a better foil to Mademoiselle Laura's impertinences than Clare's utter unconsciousness. Still, this worlding was spoiling her dreams and her memories.

"I am glad you forget so much, Mademoiselle

Laura," she said, with gentle dignity, "since our memories seem so unlike. Will you come and see my garden, Miss O'Donoghue? It is one of my greatest joys. Are you a gardener? I am sure you are at heart, even if you have not time to devote to it."

They went out into the spacious hall and down the steps between the terraces, on which peacocks spread their gorgeous plumage. Mademoiselle and Mabel Egerton were left alone. They were silent for a few seconds; then Mademoiselle lifted her daring brown eyes to meet the reproachful expression in Mabel Egerton's blue ones, and laughed.

"I can't change towards you," said Mabel Egerton, sorrowfully. "Why did you make me so fond of you? And was that or was this the real Laura?"

"I fear, *petite*, this is the real Laura. Was I something else to gain you? Then forgive me because of the—the incitement. Also, I am perhaps too loyal to you, whence my tongue sharpens itself."

"Why should you be rude to our visitor out of loyalty to me? What have the things to do with each other?"

Mademoiselle shot a sharp glance at the fair, open face.

"Ah, what indeed?" she said enigmatically.

"Do you know—forgive me, Laura—you were almost vulgar to-day?—what you said to Miss O'Donoghue about your schoolfellows being all noble, especially. And, after all, she could endure it; her family is so old."

"So old that it has deteriorated. *La mère*, for example, with her childish scoldings of this Meg."

"In these countries, Laura, we take the positions of our friends' friends on trust; Miss O'Donoghue is Clare's friend and mine. I am really angry with you, because you make yourself disagreeable to her; you oughtn't to do it. How vexed Gervase would be if he knew! And the girl is very proud."

"You will not tell M. Gervase?"

There was a flutter of alarm in the clever, brown face.

"I shouldn't think of doing such a thing; I want Gervase to like you."

"Ah! and you shall teach me to be polite to your Meg. You shall see how charming I can be. Wait till she returns. I shall be so that—you will see—all

will be rub out, perfectly forgiven. She will say to herself, 'I have misjudged this Laura.' "

"That will be nice of you," said Mabel Egerton, with simple gratitude.

Meanwhile, in the garden below, Miss Fitzmaurice and Meg walked to and fro between the espaliered beds. Fruit in the old garden grew side by side with roses and lilies. It was a square enclosure of red brick, the walls all but covered with cherries and peaches and apricots. Within the espaliers, in the little garden-beds, dahlias sunned themselves like very stately ladies. Here was a bed of stocks, there one of Canterbury bells; carnations scented the air deliciously; the great spikes of the white lilies were just opening.

"Tell me," said Clare, "about the garden at St. Cyprian's—not the garden where we walked, but the nuns' garden, where we sometimes went on feast-days. Is it just the same, the view over the sand-dunes, grey and sad, and the garden so bowery and so flowery, with innocent shrines in the tree-trunks, and the tiny lake with water-lilies, and the apple trees with the little, hard, red fruit, and the quinces and medlars? What preserves they

used to make ; or was it only that then one was a child ? ”

Suddenly Meg saw it all, the beloved place where she and Germaine knew such perfect friendship together. There was nothing grinding and sordid there, hardly a suspicion that she was different from her friend. She had been very young when she had gone to St. Cyprian's, and a child's memory idealizes. She had no suspicion of the disgrace of her father's degradation. She remembered him young and gay ; and a pretty, fresh mother. St. Cyprian's was a memory without trouble. Here in this green, luxuriant land her shoulders had bent to take on the yoke of life, and in some ways the yoke galled her.

That was her real home, not this.

“ ‘ Home was home then, my dear, full of kindly faces ;
Home was home then, my dear, happy for the child, ’ ”

she sighed to herself in the secret places of her heart.

But because here was another who loved it, it became easy for her to put all her memories into words. The new, young Sisters who had come, the old Sisters who had died, the new rose-window in the Convent chapel, the fine marble statue of St.

Cyprian in the corridor, the modern improvements the nuns were so proud of in the schoolroom and the children's dormitories. How the great thorn tree had had a limb broken in a winter storm, but, the limb being propped and yet somewhat adhering to the tree, it had bloomed like a miracle of snow. The new lay-sister who made such marvels in confectionery; the cote of doves Sister Stephanie had set up before the house-door; the water-wheel that sang to itself in a green corner of the Dark Walk, and singing, forced the water into the Convent.

There was so much to tell and to hear that the time passed as if by magic. The sun had slanted away behind the house and left the garden in shadow; the wood-doves were all crooning; and suddenly Meg found that it was time to go home.

"But you have not seen the shrine," said Miss Fitzmaurice, looking up at the tower through the lantern of which the sun, hidden from them, was yet shining. "You will come again very soon? It has been delightful to hear so much. I used to think I would go back there; it was my dream. But I stayed to take care of Gervase. Now I do not think I shall ever go; I am too old."

"No, surely," said Meg; "they looked for your coming. Your welcome is waiting for you if you choose to go."

"I am too old; one has to embrace that life young. I have seen too much of older women trying, only to return to the world again. I have found my convent—when Gervase no longer needs me. It is in the world, amongst our own people cast away in London. I could tell you such stories of the things that happen to them when they wander away from this quiet, green country, from within hearing of the Angelus bell. The poor souls, the poor bodies; and the children born in the likeness of angels learning such things! It is terrible."

"Will you be able to endure it?" asked Meg, looking at the transparent face and the shadows under the uplifted eyes.

"I can bear it less well here where I am not helping them. I shall be even happy. I'm not going to do it without knowing all about it. The very room I shall have high up in a crazy house I have seen. There are workers there before me: Anglican sisters, the Salvation Army, many others working in the name of our common Master. But

I shall have my little plot of ground. It is our people these do not reach, and I shall give my life to them. Oh, I shall endure it—more, I desire it. St. Cyprian's never called to me half so sweetly as that garret in the narrow street of tottering houses I remember."

For a moment Meg leaped to the beauty of this unearthly passion beside which the human ties and joys seemed as seems the hearth-fire by the stars. Only for a moment. She was young; and her heart clung vehemently to life, cried aloud for the warm things of life which were the rightful inheritance of her youth and her beautiful health. She was not yet so disillusioned, so used to disappointment as to find her abiding city where the saints and the anchorites have found theirs.

"Gervase will like to show you the shrine," Miss Fitzmaurice went on. "We make rather a privilege of letting people see it. Mademoiselle St. Victor has been some weeks here, and she has never yet seen it. We ask a reverence like our own; or what is the relic except a few charred bones?"

"Glorious bones!" said Meg, with a fire coming into her peaceful eyes.

"You would feel it; I never doubted that. But I am a little afraid of Mademoiselle St. Victor; she has a way with her that seems a little—incredulous, and we are sensitive about the Hand. She is a very good-hearted girl and very charming at times, though her speeches occasionally sound strange. Of course, if she wasn't very nice she wouldn't be Mabel's friend."

"She is a Parisian and worldly wise," said Meg. "She is the sister-in-law of my dearest friend, who is as unworldly as—as you. But she has married into a family of very fashionable people. It is not easy to be in the world and quite escape the world."

"Ah, that is it, I suppose. Yet she is very good, or Mabel would not like her. I have brought up Mabel; I am proud of her. Now she repays me; she will take care of Gervase. She can do so much for him."

She stopped with a slight flush.

"Forgive me, my dear, for talking of family matters," she said. "I feel as if I had always known you, and my heart is so full of peace about Gervase that I feel as if I must say my thanksgiving aloud. I could not have endured to think of him poor and pinched, yet could I have hoped that he

would find the woman in the world—the world which he never enters—who would be all to him that he needs, and yet would bring him the material help that is so sadly wanted? The child I myself reared—could I have asked for better?”

As they went back to the house they encountered Captain Fitzmaurice and Miss Egerton coming in search of them. They stayed a little while on the terrace talking, and presently they were joined by the French girl.

Mademoiselle was evidently bent on keeping her word to her friend. The cynicism had vanished from her charming face. She put out now all her efforts to please, which was to say a good deal. With little caressing touches she tried to heal the wounds her sharp speeches had made. She was gay and witty and gentle and suave all at once.

Simple Meg began to wonder if it all could have been a mistake, and her dulness at fault in imagining unkindness where none was meant. Clare Fitzmaurice, who lived in unruffled peace with all the world, smiled gently on the girl who had vaguely disturbed her a little while before. Mabel put her arm through her friend's in a frank and generous

acknowledgment of her making amends, which pleased Mademoiselle Laura, who liked better to be delightful and delighting than the reverse. Even Gervase Fitzmaurice's grave face lighted up at some of Mademoiselle's sallies, and he smiled on her with open friendliness, which had in it, perhaps, a tinge of repentance for certain rash judgments.

Afterwards the two girls and Fitzmaurice walked home with Meg through the dewy lanes, where the blackbird was singing his best, repeating over and over a bar or two of a little dance-tune, set for the jocund feet of the young summer. The evening was full of peace; and it was good that no sharp tongue stabbed the gentleness between them.

Meg could assent more easily for the future than she had been accustomed to to her mother's praises of the French girl. It was easy to believe that the malice, if it had been there, had passed away, because it seemed so little likely that any one connected in her thoughts with Germaine could deliberately wound her. If afterwards her doubts recurred, well, Mademoiselle Laura had gone back to her own world, and the peace of the life spent in the fields was too deep to be even lightly disturbed by her memory.

CHAPTER XVI.

“WHAT A THING FRIENDSHIP IS.”

“MY GERMAINE,

“Still you complain that I do not write so often, nor at such length as of old. You forget that I am a working woman now, up with the lark in the morning, and home only when he is singing his vesper song. I have no more the long hours in the quiet house, which I used to fill with my journal to you last year, though I have long hours in the fields in which to think of you and all your happiness. I am so grateful that amidst it you have yet room for me.

“This is the second year in which I am at home, and it is now a year since I turned farmer. You ask me if I like it. Well, it is a hermitage of work. Some such peace as we read of that used to fall to the lot of saintly men of the desert, while they sat

and looked at Eternity and their own souls, is in the life of the fields. Mortal matters—love and death, joy and sorrow—are far away. You are of Nature, part of the plan, and a beneficent plan surely.

“You will think me cold, Germaine—you, with your warm human lot. Ah! but I am not. I love you as of old, and often and often, while I am in the fields, my spirit is in Château de Neuville, wandering through the rooms my heart loves, and pausing near your chair or your father’s. How glad I am that you are with him part of the year. One of these evenings, as you sit by candle-light in the salon, and the wind seems to blow from the pine woods through the open window to sigh against your ear, it will be, not the wind, but the wandering spirit of your poor friend.

“So Mademoiselle Laura did not satisfy you about me. She could tell you nothing. She did not like me, for some reason I fear, and she knew nothing of me.

“Her friend, Miss Egerton, I saw often after she had left. If I had had time we should have become great friends. She is a charming creature, half of the world, half unworldly, but quite sound and

sweet at heart. She is to marry Captain Fitzmaurice. He has told me so, though the engagement is not yet public. She will be a sweet and true wife for him; and, no doubt, she will learn to be all unworldly for his sake.

"My mother still resents my farming, and will always, I am afraid; but, as it is part of her love for me, I bear with it. No doubt her resentment grows less when there is nothing to stir it into life. She was delighted with Mademoiselle Laura, and was angry with me that I was not like her. She is as unreasonable as she is intrepid and unselfish.

"Her rheumatism is no worse, though she will hardly again be fit for really active life. Sometimes I win her to forget how great a disappointment I am to her, and for a while she is interested in my projects. I have so many of them. I am like you when you began to cook, and wanted to do all the cookery-book at once.

~ "One of my plans does not offend her. They are opening up the country about here by means of light railways, and we are coming to be within reach of towns and markets. I have it in my mind to grow fruits and vegetables for a country which uses them

too little. Then, in the rearing of poultry and the sale of eggs there is much to be done ; and I shall keep bees and sell honey. I shall have a dairy, and sell milk and ' cream and fresh butter. Perhaps, in time, I shall content myself with this garden-farming ; and, since there are only my mother and I, shall find enough scope in my own home-farm at Killisky, and let Captain Fitzmaurice, who is ready to do it, take up the other farms.

“ If all this should come about, in time, I need go no more to the fairs and markets my mother abhors for me. To think she should keep the convention for me, having so utterly disregarded it herself ! You will think, with your ways of thought, that I should creep back to the sheltered life with relief. But no ; there is an exhilaration, a freedom in meeting one's fellow-men on their own level, asking nothing of them of forbearance because one is a woman.

“ They have grown used to me now ; my mother paved the way for me ; and I go to and fro among them like one of themselves. They are often rough and jocular, but not rude. They are good people ; and I am amused to find how often Captain Fitzmaurice is at my elbow, lest I should need him. I

never do, unless it might be to protect me from offers of marriage in the open market, of which I have had many: most business-like proposals, in which the husband is nothing and his worldly goods everything. Presently I shall get the reputation of a vestal, and then there will be no more offers.

“‘What a thing friendship is, world without end.’ Do you remember when we read that together? I—I am blest in friendship. There is you, my Germaine, who taught me so much of how to live; there is Miss Hevey, my delightful spinster friend, who has upheld me in my struggle, and has taught me all she knows—you and she are worlds apart, yet you would love her, Germaine, such a big heart and mind in this little, little world!—there is Miss Fitzmaurice, half of heaven.

“And there is Captain Fitzmaurice. Since he saved my life he has been my friend, ever ready to help me and tide me over difficulties; though he says that I have learnt farming so quickly that I am shooting ahead of them all. And, when he brings home his wife, there will be another friend.

“Five friends in the world—what could one wish for more? It is many for twenty-two years. There!

I had nearly forgotten Mr. Fitzmaurice, whom they call here the Counsellor—he who persuaded my mother to let me take up her work. He pats me on the head or shoulder when we meet, much as he does the village children, for whom he carries a pocketful of sweets. Then he has always a sly joke, which he enjoys so much himself that you must enjoy it with him. It is good to laugh; the life of the fields tends to make one laughterless as the animals. Yes; I must add Counsellor Fitzmaurice to the list of my friends.

“Yesterday morning I went to a horse-fair and bought a little pony to replace the one I now have, who is old, and finds the work I give him too hard. He is to spend the end of his meritorious days between the stable and the paddock, with a little, little work thrown in to keep him in health.

“What a morning it was, with the sun rising over the sea, and the mists curling upwards and blowing away from the fields! Captain Fitzmaurice overtook me as we trotted along, and he walked his horse to suit my pony’s paces. So beautiful was it that we hardly spoke. He feels the beauty of things as I do, though he has no words to speak of it.

"He, too, is anxious that the day should come when I need not go to fair and market. In the farming he sees nothing unwomanly, but he does not like my equality with men, often rough. He would make me stay at home if he could, offering to transact my business for me at such places; but why should a woman do her work half-heartedly?

"However, if it comes to pass that I can give up part of my work, it will repay me for anything I miss that I am able to please him as well as my mother; and you, too, my Germaine. Do you remember when we agreed long ago, not knowing it would fall to my lot, that it would be pleasant to deal in such delicious articles of commerce as fruit and vegetables, and the fragrant cream and butter and honey—all the fresh country things?

"But I wish you could see my pony. He is shaggier than Snap, and as wise. He was led up to me in the fair by a lad with a pair of wild, innocent eyes under a shock of hair. There stood the pony by him, like master like man, wild bright eyes under a tangled mane. I call him Mop, and he loves me already, will run to me, and rub his nose against my arm. It is good to have a creature to

pet not eventually destined to be killed for food. Of the fate of my lambs and calves I try not to think ; they do not go from me to the butcher—that must suffice for me. You will gather from this this I do not accept every possible aspect of the farming life. I love rather to make things live than to see them die.

“And now I must go, for I am called. It is a quiet Sunday afternoon, and it has been good to write at length. Good-bye, my Germaine,

“Ever thy most devoted

“MEG.”

“Yes, Bridget, I am coming!” she cried, as she hastily thrust her letter into its envelope and addressed it.

“’Deed then! ’tisin’t so often you’ve people to see you that you need keep them stannin’ when they do come!” Bridget called up the stairs in an acid voice.

“Don’t mind her, dear!” came in Miss Hevey’s voice following. “You’re worth waiting for, Meg. Or shall I come up to you?”

She was at the door by the time Meg could utter



her assent or go to meet her, and presently she was looking round the room in the roof, with admiration.

"I don't know what there is about a girl's room," she said, half to herself. "The room of an older woman somehow never looks the same, though it may be twice as fine, and twice as comfortable. 'Tis like girlhood itself, I suppose—our rooms change with us."

She sat down on Meg's little white bed and stared at the walls, papered with roses, almost hidden by photographs and tiny bits of pictures, at the old writing-table from which Meg had stood up, the shelf of china, the case of books, the small-paned window framed in roses and honeysuckle.

"So this is where you dream your dreams, my dear?" she said.

"I have not much time for dreaming," laughed Meg; "and I find the sleep of the labouring man sweet—too sweet not to be dreamless."

Miss Hevey looked at her sharply.

"You'll dream all the same," she said; "every girl worth her salt does. It needn't always be of lovers, you know, but it usually is. You have to

pay for the dream sometimes, but you wouldn't be without it all the same."

"I've no time for dreaming;" said Meg, and there was a suggestion of doggedness in her voice.

Miss Hevey heard it and passed it by.

"I'll trust you never to make a fool of yourself, anyhow," she said. "And long may you have the dreamless sleep, child. But now, listen to me! I've come to tell you of the queerest marriage you'll hear of for many a day; I thought I'd like to tell you myself. 'Tis somebody that had to wake out of her dreams when she was a girl and had a right to them—perhaps she'd better have let them lie now."

She looked at Meg half shyly, half comically, and a very becoming colour rose up in her cheeks.

"No," cried Meg, "not you—not yourself! Don't tell me it is you, Miss Hevey."

"It's me, sure enough," said the spinster. "I've said 'no' often enough to Tom McGrath, but he wouldn't take it for an answer at last. You know there was an old, ancient kindness between us long ago, when I was a girl, and had just such a room as this. 'The people will say we are mad, Tom McGrath,' said I. 'I was mad,' said he, 'when I

let you slip through my fingers long ago, and 'tis mad I'd be,' said he, 'to take "no" for an answer after all these years.' 'Ah, go away, Tom McGrath,' said I, 'and marry a woman that has something of youth left to her.' 'Does a husband know, Maria,' said he, 'when the wife of his heart grows old? And you've been the wife of my heart all these years; and you're handsomer to-day,' he said, 'than you were when we said "good-bye" at the orchard gate thirty years ago. But, indeed, if you were ugly instead of handsome,' said he, 'twould be all the same; you'd be the one woman in the world for me, Maria. There has never been any other woman.' "

Miss Hevey broke off, and Meg saw the sparkle of tears in her eyes.

"Oh, how glad I am," she said, "that you are going to be happy after all."

Miss Hevey laughed. "But think of what Judy Ryan will say, my dear."

"As if it could matter," said Meg, scornfully.

"As if it could matter," said the bride-elect. Then she went on in another tone, "You're the only one I've told about it, Meg, and the only one that knows, except the Counsellor. Tom told

him, and he came yesterday, with his present—the prettiest little whip brooch, made of pearls and diamonds. But, upon my word, I cared more for what he said than for the gift even. 'Tis surprising how he's everybody's friend."

"He's a dear old man," said Meg.

"He loves a love-affair, my dear. You know how his sweetheart died. So I suppose he thinks even an old maid's marriage better than none."

"You mustn't say such things. Dr. McGrath was right; you couldn't have been sweeter as a girl than you are to-day."

"Hush, now, Meg, or I'll be sorry for having told you his folly. There, he is the faithfulest——"

She broke off suddenly.

"But, all the same, I wish I was a young girl, dreaming dreams, for Tom's sake, and the dreams to come true. Not but what it is good to have the end of our days together, and the man—God bless him!—satisfied."

She kissed Meg, who was standing holding her hands, and was silent for a minute. Then she looked round the little white room.

"I'm stealing away to Dublin to be married," she

said, “to escape all the chatter. They’ll talk about us ; but, sure, we don’t mind—he doesn’t, God bless him ! And now, my dear, may every sweet dream dreamt in this room come true, while yet you are young enough to enjoy them ! Only don’t dream of the wrong man, Meg mavourneen—don’t dream of the wrong man !”

CHAPTER XVII.

PAUL.

It was an afternoon of September, and Meg was superintending the gathering-in of the harvest. The reaping-machine was singing merrily through the corn, and leaving behind it a track of fallen swathes and golden stubble like the path a ship ploughs for itself through the waters. A number of women were following, binding the corn together, and standing it up in stooks. Meg sat in her little pony cart watching the work and seeing that every one did their part. A long line of white geese had waddled into the field, and were hunting for grains that had fallen in the track of the machine.

Suddenly Meg's attention was distracted from her workpeople by a figure which was leisurely making its way along the field path. Meg watched it with startled eyes; it was something very unexpected

for these regions, and, as it came closer, the interest quickened in her face. A flush rose to her cheek.

"It is surely Paul!" she said to herself, and her thoughts were half vexed, half pleased. "To think he should have made his way here, the dear, foolish boy! And now shall I have all my trouble over again?"

She touched up her pony and drove smartly to meet the pedestrian. When she had nearly reached him she pulled up, dropped the reins, and extended both hands in a welcome her eyes and lips ratified.

"Paul, dear Paul!" she said.

He was dressed in a suit of Lincoln green, the latest concession of the boulevards to the English shooting season. It was made in a Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, and the lad, slight and dark, with velvety dark eyes and a little silky moustache, looked like the handsome forester of an opera. There was a half-smile in Meg's affectionate and full glance at him as she took in the smart attire.

"So you have found me out, Paul?"

"I could not endure any longer, Meg. I had to come."

"And Germaine? How have you left Germaine? Does she know you have come?"

“I broke away suddenly at the commands of my heart. I was in Paris. They talk of me there. I am one of the names of the hour. But even glory was not enough. I wanted——”

“Did Germaine know?” Meg broke in hastily.

“Madame St. Victor is at her country seat,” said the lad, with a frown at the interruption. “I came away on an impulse. There was no time to tell any one. And you, Meg, are you glad to see me?”

“It was a dear impulse; and of course I am glad. But how did you drop down here like this? When did you come? Where are you staying?”

“Your train brought me this morning. But—it was slow! a very tortoise of a train. ’Twas not only that my heart ran before it——”

“I know. That train was raced by a pig last year, all the way from Ballymuck to Kilcolman. The pig won by ten seconds.”

Again the boy frowned. “I left my bag at your village—inn, is it? Kept by a kind-hearted woman, who reminded me of our peasants of Brittany.”

“We are cousins, we and the Bretons. But Mrs. Malony, Paul! she is kind, I suppose, but you must

be horribly uncomfortable. It must be frightfully noisy, and I am afraid it is not very clean."

"It is a *cabaret*," said Paul, philosophically. "True, it is noisy, but at the *cabaret* people disport themselves. And not clean—well, I have desired to live in a garret with the Immortals. She spread me excellent bacon and eggs, and offered me my choice of a menu that made me open my eyes. Yet the excellent bacon and eggs served me."

"It will have to serve you if you stay long at Mrs. Malony's, Paul," said Meg, laughing. "The menu is simply imaginary; there will never be anything but bacon and eggs."

"They tasted delicious. And I stay—as long as you permit me."

"Poor Paul!" Meg gazed at him with thoughtful eyes.

He could not stay at the village public, yet what could she do with him as an inmate of Killisky? She would be out all day, and would it be fair to leave so large a slice of his entertainment to her mother? She put away the consideration of the question. Let her mother settle it. She looked at the business-like little watch in a bracelet on her wrist.

"The Angelus will ring in half an hour," she said. "It is the signal for the people to leave off work. Then I am going to take you home, and give you a more substantial meal than Mrs. Malony can, and introduce you to my mother."

"It will be perfect," murmured Paul.

"And afterwards you will tell me of Germaine and how happy she is—of her house, her husband. I am greedy for the little things which are not told in letters, though Germaine writes frequently and gives me news of you all. The Vicomte, I know, is well; my last letter from Germaine is but a week old."

"My father enjoys good health. Germaine told you about me—what they said of my *Nuances*?"

"She sent me the papers. I was delighted. You are quite a great man, dear Paul. It is good of you to remember old friends."

"As if praise were anything but a handful of dead leaves if I could not bring it to lay at your feet."

"Still the same romantic Paul."

"Ever the same, adorable Meg."

"You are to be sensible while you stay here," she said with an air of gentle reproof.

"It is the most sensible that I achieve to love you. Germaine says so."

He walked by the pony's head back to the place at the top of the sloping field whence she had come to greet him.

"And this is your work?" he said looking away before him.

"This, and much less agreeable. I don't play at the country life; see—I am a true daughter of the fields."

She held up her gloveless hands and indicated, with a cheerful mockery of herself, her dusty skirt and shoes a little bedrabbled with the heavy dews of the morning.

"It would be my life if I might choose it. To till the earth all day, at night by the fireside to compose my poems. To be aware only of the songs the birds sing, and to hear far away the noise of my fame."

"You would sleep the sleep of the labouring man. You would be too tired to make poems."

"I should live them if you were by my side."

"Foolish Paul! you would be horribly unhappy. Paris would call you. I am different; I sleep superbly. I am aware of nothing from the time my

head touches my pillow till Bridget wakes me at six o'clock. I have the appetite of a hunter. But then there are no voices for me to be faithless to."

"You look well, Meg—superb; yet you are changed. Something a little grave, a little sad, has come upon you. You are no longer the girl."

"I have responsibilities. But here comes Tom Lacy, my head man. It must be on the stroke of six, and he wants money for these people. Ah, there is the Angelus!"

Three silver strokes of a bell floated over the golden fields, and the busy scene was suddenly still. The gleaning women straightened themselves, and looked under their sun-bonnets towards Miss Meg and her visitor, whom they were agreed in pronouncing "a quare-looking gazabo of a lad entirely." The horses were taken out of the machine, and their heads turned for home. And Meg lifting the flaps of her jacket with a half-deprecating smile at Paul, revealed a great buttoned pocket of chamois leather slung round her waist, from which she proceeded to count out stacks of shillings into Tom Lacy's hands, to be transferred to the waiting hands of the work-people.

At last the somewhat lengthy process came to an end, and the workers gradually dispersed.

The hills now were bathed in purple shadows, but their heights were pale. It was a world of gold and purple—yellow on the fields and the sky, masses of gorgeous yellow weeds by the roadside; but the shadows purple, and the hedges bronze and purple, and the mountains black-purple as the deepest pansy.

Paul mounted into the seat by Meg's side, and they drove away down the cool, shadowy road where the birds were singing their aftermath of song.

"You are too smart for me and my equipage, Paul," said Meg, smiling. "I don't trust any one but myself to curry my little Mop and plait that wild mane of his, or to clean my harness; and these harvest times I have to be so early astir that I am too tired at night to attend to the things."

"The equipage is fitting," said Paul, serenely. "It is not as though you drove in the Bois."

Meg looked at him in wonder. She half intended to disillusion him, to make him see her rough, unfeminine, a peasant—as a de Neuville, accustomed to

delicate, ascetic ways for the women of his family, might see her. Yet she was pitiful over herself, and felt relieved and proud of him when she saw that she presented no such aspect to him.

"But you are smart, dear Paul," she said, looking down at his green suit and brown boots, and up again at his soft hat of green felt.

"It is *le dernier cri* for the country," he said simply, "so they told me. You like it, Meg?"

"It is charming."

"I have money of my own to spend—since my poems are become a little famous. You know there was not much money at the Château."

"The things at the Château were such as money could not buy."

"I have wanted to see you, at home in your own beautiful country, amid the setting Nature gave you."

"And now?"

"It is enchanting. So fresh, so tender, so vivid; and you in the midst of it a sylvan goddess, frank and fearless."

"Ah, I shall shock you, Paul. I am only a farmer—a peasant. When you realize it you will forget the goddess."

"What is the life of books, of towns, of men to compare with it? It is to lay one's ear against the ground and hear the little voices of the lives that spring from it. It is to be suckled at Nature's breasts."

"We are at Killisky, Paul, so you can rhapsodize no more. This is the thatched, dim, old-fashioned house where I was born."

"With those little eyes of windows amid the rose bushes, and the birds' nests in the thatch. It is adorable."

He followed Meg into the dim little hall and the room beyond, where, in a half-light of fire and waning day, Mrs. O'Donoghue reclined on her sofa. As they came in a tall figure rose from a deep chair beside the fire. It was Captain Fitzmaurice, who had dropped in for one of his chats with the widow. Meg was never surprised to find him when she came home in the evening.

"It is M. Paul de Neuville, mother," she said, blinking in the owl's light; "he has dropped upon us out of the moon. I told him how pleased you would be to meet him."

"Any friend of my Meg's must be welcome to me;

and I'm sure the kindness of your family to my girl, sir, couldn't be greater. Welcome to Killisky! I trust you've come to stay a good long time."

Meg introduced the two men, who bowed stiffly.

"How long do you suppose he'll stand Mrs. Malony's fare and lodgings, mother?" said Meg, in quite high spirits. "He is in raptures over her bacon and eggs."

"Oh, the poor, dirty steele that she was always!—it's no place for a gentleman. You must be hungry, Mr. de Neuville. Sit down and make a comfortable tea, and we'll see if we can't hit on something better than poor Peggy Malony's for you."

"But it suffices—admirably," protested Paul.

"I can almost claim a connection with M. de Neuville," interposed Captain Fitzmaurice, "since Mdlle. Laura St. Victor is my cousin's friend, and lately my guest. If he will honour me so far as to accept the hospitality of Killylea?"

"I should not venture, sir——" began Paul.

"I think I should ask any gentleman, thrown on the hospitality of Mrs. Malony, to accept mine instead. It will be a favour, M. de Neuville, if you will treat my house as your own while you remain."

Paul looked towards Meg.

"I think it would be a very pleasant arrangement," she said, smiling gratefully at Captain Fitzmaurice.

"Very well, then, I shall accept, sir, with many thanks; and shall hope that it may fall to my lot to repay one day a kindness so gracious, so unexpected."

"You are very welcome. I shall send a man over for your traps. You had better come to us to-night."

"There is nothing that I cannot carry. But to-night—I think not to-night. To-morrow, if you please."

The Captain thought he understood. This youth was an old friend of Meg's—a lover, a possible husband. He wanted to spend as long an evening as he might talking with her unhampered by the prospect of taking up his residence at Killylea.

"Very well, then, to-morrow," he said; and his voice had a suggestion of coldness. "To-morrow about noon I shall call for you, and we will walk back to Killylea together. I shall tell my sister we are to have the pleasure of your society."

Paul saw his future host make his adieux with satisfaction. It had disquieted him to see this big man in the chimney-corner at Meg's home with such

an air of being used to its occupation. He was relieved when Captain Fitzmaurice refused even a cup of tea, pleading that it would spoil his dinner. But he certainly did not like Meg's going to the door with him so naturally, as though it happened every day, although they were finishing a discussion on the merits of a new reaper and binder which Meg vowed she would not use because it did away with the employment.

"You were kind to ask him," she said, as she stood on the doorstep.

"I thought you would wish it," Captain Fitzmaurice answered with a kindness which, in spite of him, seemed forced.

"You are out of sympathy with him, but he is a dear boy. His play-acting clothes don't mean that he is not as manly as other people."

"I am sure he is all you say."

"And Miss Egerton will be glad, because of her friend, that you have given him hospitality."

"I dare say it will please Mabel; but, frankly, I asked him to please you. It's nothing to make a fuss about, of course; one would do it for anybody—cast away at the Widow Malony's."

"Paul can really rough it, though perhaps he doesn't look like it in those clothes."

The Captain's eyebrows contracted in a sudden frown.

"I am not at all likely to misjudge your friend," he said, as he turned away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FAIR.

THE mists curled off the yellow fields. Every bronze and scarlet and golden leaf was dripping, and the valleys were filled, as with gray water, to any one beholding them from the upper roads. Paul de Neuville and Meg O'Donoghue saw every aspect of the morning's beauty. They were driving through the sparkle and shine of it along a mountain road, Meg holding the reins and making little Mop give a good account of himself.

"It is exquisite," said the boy, drawing a long breath.

"You will remember it when you are back in Paris."

"I shall remember it. I shall remember more than that."

Meg looked between the pony's ears.

"I have come across the sea for an answer, Meg. You will not return me empty-handed."

"Dear Paul, the answer is the same now as it always has been."

"It is 'No'?"

"It sounds so bare—so harsh. I hate to refuse you anything, Paul. You don't know how fond I am of you."

The lad's face brightened. "It will not always be 'No,' beloved Meg?"

"Paul, how sanguine you are, how patient!"

"I shall go on hoping until I hear you are the bride of another."

"You will never hear that, Paul."

"Then I shall hope endlessly."

"Listen, Paul; you will see to-day, at the fair, men such as I ought to marry, the class into which I was born. By sheer accident I strayed into your sphere. I have come back into my own, where I shall remain."

"Why, when you would adorn any sphere?"

"I belong to my own."

"You would belong to mine."

"If the impossible were to happen."

“ Why should it be impossible? If it were that I was repugnant to you, I should not press myself upon you. If it were that there was another, I should respect your choice, although it made me despair. But there is no other. Where could he come from? At first I am jealous. I make myself unhappy because that le Capitaine Gervase sits by your fire. Now I understand that his heart is elsewhere I love him, I embrace him; he is a brave man. Figure to yourself, Meg, that I was jealous!”

“ It was an odd notion, dear Paul.”

“ See, then, you have more than a regard, you are fond—it is a good word—of me. You love no other. You are gracious in the sight of the Vicomte, my father. You are adored by my sister. You know Chateau de Neuville and love it. It cries out for a mistress. We are poor, but we are an old, honourable family. We take you to our hearts. Come, Meg!—my father is lonely since Germaine married—come and be his daughter; be Germaine’s sister; be the mistress of my house!”

For an instant Meg’s eyes looked as if they saw a vision sweet and gracious. Then she turned them upon the eager young face.

"Bring home a happier girl to Château de Neuville. Ah, Paul, does it make no difference to you seeing me here?"

"How should it make?"

"The hard, rough life, the peasant surroundings. When you came I trembled before the amazement I imagined in you; yet I wished—I willed myself to wish—that you should be disillusioned, cured, done with the old folly."

"Folly! Ah, never folly!"

"I beg your pardon, Paul. I have let you see me engaged in rough work, I have exaggerated my rough clothes; if I could, I would have made my face weather-beaten and my voice hoarse, so that I might send you back to your proper mate. Why, I have brought you here, this morning, that you might see me bargaining with frieze-coated farmers—a peasant among peasants, trafficking in cattle and sheep."

"All that is foolish," said the boy, placidly, "since you are still Meg."

"There is worse," said the girl, in a hesitating voice. "Would you forget it all, Paul, if I were to tell you something about my family?—no, not my

family: it has glorious memories, though we are fallen to be peasants; but about my father—something that plunged my mother's life in terror and gloom; something that—— ”

With hands flung out the boy refused her confidence.

“ Spare yourself the pain, beloved, since nothing matters; none of those old, unhappy, far-off things, as your Wordsworth says, can touch you. But as for Madame O'Donoghue, I read that she has passed through tragedy. She is worthy to be Meg's mother. I love her, I honour her.”

“ She is devoted to you. You are good, Paul, winding her wools and listening to her simple talk as you do.”

“ Good! Why I am happy at her side. If I were not—I am a selfish fellow—I should flee. Ah, what a world of women: you, Madame O'Donoghue, the heavenly Clare, my sister. A-a-ah!”

“ You admire Miss Fitzmaurice?”

“ I look daily at the shoulders of her white gown in expectation to see the wings bud. She talks to me of you; she is your friend. Why will you not see her more?”

Meg's lips tightened.

"Ah, the obstinate Meg! It is as when you bid me be still and say no more of my desire."

"To little effect, Paul."

There was the *thud thud* of a horse's hooves on the soft turfy road behind them, and Meg drew to one side to let the rider pass; but, instead, he slackened his pace and came level with them. It was Gervase Fitzmaurice cantering along in the morning sunshine, cheerful with exercise, and, in spite of his rough homespuns, wearing his usual air of well-groomed distinction.

"So I've overtaken you," he said. "How do you do, Miss Meg? This fellow was in good time, was he? I believe he sat up all night in order to be in time. I suggested driving him to the fair in the dog-cart, but he refused with scorn."

"Not scorn, my friend," interposed Paul, anxiously.

"Well—indifference, most literal of poets! What kind of fair are we going to have, Miss Meg?"

"A big fair, I expect. I see strings of cattle coming in by the lower road. Are you selling?"

"Buying. I've room for a few stall feds, and I'll have plenty of roots. And you?"

.

“ Better look at my bullocks ; I’ve thirteen in the fair. They’re very big, though they’d bear more feeding. I’m expecting a big price for them.”

“ Ah, then perhaps it’s too big for me. I’ll look at them presently, however. Any buying ? ”

“ I want a good cow. One of those little half-Kerries would suit me well. They’re good milkers and kindly.”

Paul listened to this conversation with the respectful interest of a complete outsider. They had come down the hill now, and were gaining on droves of little mountain-cattle, urged along by tatterdemalion lads and men as wild—all barefoot, all flourishing sticks and shouting at the top of their voices.

They passed the railway-station yard, where a number of waggons stood on the sidings, ready to carry the cattle away from the fair. A couple of stalwart constables in semi-military uniform whiled away the tedium of the long wait between the trains by talking outside the station to peasant girls, who were coming in with geese or ducks to sell. The squeaking of pigs was mingled with the lowing of oxen and the bleating of sheep. Now and again a

boy went by leading a pony which might be Mop himself from the strong family likeness. All manner of agricultural creatures came to be sold at the fair, though it was properly only a fair for sheep and cattle.

"There will be extra men on duty after the fair," said the Captain to Meg, as though in continuation of a discussion.

"Ah, then the beasts will not be ill-treated," said Meg, with a sigh of relief.

"They are cruel, then, these cheerful *vauriens*?" put in Paul, looking at the wild drivers.

"They drink bad whisky, and the exasperation of it mounts to their brains," answered the Captain. "Also with the railway company it is first come first served. They are cruel in trying to get their beasts to the waggons before any one else's."

"Listen to the bleating and the lowing!" said Meg. "It is the voice of the dumb herds calling to Heaven for vengeance."

"Ah, I hear it," said Paul, with a fire in his velvety eyes.

"But there is another side to the picture," Fitzmaurice went on. "They are not all over-driven

and beaten to the railway station, to be packed together in darkness in a blind terror. Many of them will go home along pleasant roads in the cool evening, picking a bit of grass as they go, with no one to terrify them or drive them, except such a one as Jerry Murray here, who has nothing but kindness to the beasts."

"How much do you want for the little cow?" asked Meg, pulling up by the roadside and addressing the apple-cheeked old man, wearing knee-breeches and blue-gray stockings, whom the Captain had indicated as Jerry Murray.

He gave his ragged caubeen a pull, and smiled at her with eyes as blue as a child's.

"Sure, I wouldn't be sellin' her, only I'm hard driven. She was rared with the little gran'-childher, an' is as biddable as a dog. I left the childher roarin' *melia murdher* after her. Could you be after doin' wid her, Miss Meg?"

"What do you want for her?"

"Och, whatever you think fair. I'd be likin' to know she was kindly trated. She's a rale pleasant little baste; she'll follow you anywhere, the same as your little tarrier. She was always for takin'

walks wid the childher, an' pickin' a bit by the wayside. 'Twas all the grass we had for her; but, sure, she'd ate anything. Anything a goat ever lived on that baste 'ud thrive on."

"I've a little paddock full of grass half as high as a man, so she needn't want for food."

"She'd think it was in Heaven she was."

"She'd be worth ten pounds to me, Jerry."

"Take her, then, and God bless you! You'd be likin' a luck-penny, miss?"

"Not from you, Jerry. Just turn her round, and take her back for me."

"She'll be rale plased. She's an aisy-frightened little baste, not bein' used to people, except childher, an' never went far from home before. But she'll let the twins claw the eye out of her; they wouldn't be manin' any harm, the cratures, only in a manner o' kindness."

"Your daughter's well, Jerry, and all the children, I hope?"

"Fairly, thank God, except that she finds it hard to pull along often, havin' lost the man; an' wid such a houseful o' childher, an' only a poor ould botch like me to help her."

The old man turned with his little broad-backed, rough-coated cow, and Meg drove on.

The Fair Green was a wide, grassy space—or, at least, it had been grassy last night, but now the cattle were ploughing it into a morass. Fresh herds were arriving every moment, and frieze-coated men, with sticks under their arms, were standing about the patient creatures, prodding them in the ribs, and feeling them all over to ascertain their condition.

Meg went across the green to where a rough paling marked its boundary. There her bullocks were awaiting her, and as she came up a possible purchaser accosted her.

“What price for the bastes, miss?”

“Twelve pounds. They’ll be worth twenty by the end of the winter.”

“Och, don’t be humbuggin’. If you wor sayin’ eight, I’d be talkin’ to you, maybe.”

“Not a penny less than twelve, Michael Heffernan. You know they’re value for it,” said Meg, with her brows drawn in a straight line.

She had left her pony-cart in charge of a boy outside. Paul had followed her, and stood watching her where she bargained, with her hand on the back

of one of her bullocks. Captain Fitzmaurice had business in another part of the fair, and had left them.

"I'll give you ten five for the three best of them, an' you'll be givin' me a luck-penny."

"I won't divide them, and they're worth twelve apiece," said Meg, doggedly.

"Come over here, Patrick Gorman!" shouted the buyer to a friend at a distance.

Another frieze-coated person with close, black hair, a bullet-head, and a square, strong, ruddy face, approached leisurely, chewing a straw.

"Here's Miss O'Donoghue goin' to destroy the sale of her bastes for a few dirty pence. I want you to split the difference."

"What's your offer?"

"Eight pounds. She's axin' twelve. Begob, she's the maddest woman in the fair this day! Or ten five for the three best. I wouldn't have the others at no price, now I come to think of it."

"Eleven fifteen," said Meg.

"Ten," said the umpire.

"Eleven five, and I won't drop another penny," said Meg.

"I'll come back at the end of the fair, an' see if

you've come to your sinses," said Michael Heffernan, pretending to walk away.

"Come back, man," said his friend, "an' don't be makin' a show o' me, after invitin' me in."

"Och, I wouldn't take them now; not if she was to make me a present of them," said the customer, apparently in high dudgeon.

Finally the bullocks were sold at eleven pounds apiece, after Mr. Heffernan had pretended, for the sixth time, to break off negotiations.

"I'll tell you what, Miss Meg," said the man called Patrick Gorman, "I wish I was bein' called in to your match-makin'. Och, begob! I wish it was me own match, so I do."

"What would Mrs. Gorman say?" asked Meg, glancing at Paul, and wondering how much of it he understood.

"'Tisn't goin' out o' the country you'd be," said the waggish Mr. Gorman, shaking his head; "and all the boys mad for you. Sure Biddy, poor woman, knows that my duty is wid her an' my inclination is another matter."

Meg laughed as she turned away to inspect some sheep that were close at hand.

The negotiations seemed to Paul, despite his interest in all that concerned Meg, and in this picturesque life, as he called it, intolerably slow. However, by nine o'clock Meg's business was concluded, and she and Paul were once more on the road.

When they had left the town, where the public-houses were doing a roaring trade, behind them, Meg turned and looked Paul wistfully in the face.

"Well! What did you think of it?" she asked.

His brows contracted a little. "It must be right, or you would not do it, Meg. But the compliments, the *badinage*—I did not altogether like it. Only my faith in you, beautiful Meg, kept me sometimes from growing angry."

"I am glad you did not do that, Paul. It is so harmless. They are kindly neighbours, and it is their way."

"Madame O'Donoghue—does she like it?"

"She hates it."

"And le Capitaine?"

"He also; though he understands the people, and you do not. He would keep me out of it, if he could. It is foolish, I think. They are good people;

a woman is safe with them. It is only their way of being kind."

"Ah, I do not doubt you, Meg. You would not be here if it were doubtful, at all. Still, I wish I might see you at home in Touraine, in Germaine's place, with my father. I wish it all the more."

"I thought, I hoped—no, I feared you would be shocked. You dear Paul, how loyal you are!"

CHAPTER XIX.

“GOOD-BYE FOR EVERMORE.”

“HE is a good lad,” said Captain Fitzmaurice, watching Meg’s averted face. “Upon my word I’ve come to love him. So has every soul in the place ; and a good many of those the theologians would have us believe were soulless.”

“I know ; it is impossible not to be fond of him. My mother is as enthusiastic as you, and he has won Bridget’s obdurate heart as well. Even Snap has accepted him—and Snap grows more exclusive.”

“There is no use in his staying—though we are all so fond of him—is there, Miss Meg ? Forgive me for asking, but we are quite friends, aren’t we ?”

“There is nothing to forgive ; but there is no use in his staying. We shall miss him when he goes.”

Quite unconsciously a note of relief had crept into Captain Fitzmaurice’s voice when he spoke again. He would rather have died than have yielded to the sudden joy that was in his heart ; but it was there,

all the same, and the knowledge that it was there made him relentless with himself, and determined to do his duty thoroughly.

"You are quite sure he ought to go?"

"Quite sure."

"There are not many like him in the world—so unselfish, so simple, so sincere. He would make any woman happy."

"He would make his cousin, the little *Made-moiselle* Victorine, happy. They were destined for each other before my shadow fell upon poor Paul. She adores him already, and she will bring the money to *Château de Neuville* which is sorely needed there."

"Will he marry her? His feeling for you seems to me to have roots."

"Not to-day, nor to-morrow, nor next year perhaps; but they are young and can wait. I shall fade out of his thoughts; I shall cross his path no more. It is not in Paul not to give love for love one day. He may marry without love. I think his feeling would be,

'If she love me, this believe,
I will die ere she shall grieve.'

"And, meanwhile, while all this is on the knees of the gods, you will send him back despairing to Paris."

Meg looked at him with slowly comprehending eyes.

"He will not be like Maurice de Guérin while Eugénie waited and prayed for him at home. Paul will not dishonour our love of him. Besides"—her eyes and voice were full of distress—"is it fair to me to plead such things for him? It is not fair indeed."

"You are quite right, Miss Meg; it is not fair. It would be the most cowardly of pleas if a man were pleading for himself."

His voice was humble, but his heart was beating hard. He had hardly known, till this moment, how much cause he had to flee if he were to save his honour.

"Clare said to me yesterday," he went on, "that it would be a very fitting marriage. Forgive me, but we all feel that your life needs another setting."

"Your sister is kind," she said, with a note of irritation in her voice; "but, indeed, I am very well where I am. No one else can judge for us. Why should people be so kind about me?"

"I beg your pardon," said Fitzmaurice, humbly.
"I am afraid I'm a stupid, blundering fellow."

And yet he threw dust in his eyes in spite of his honesty of purpose. He could not be sorry that his pleadings with Meg had failed. He was very little insular, he said to himself, but despite the affection Paul had extorted from him, he could not wholly forget the moment he had first seen him, and called him, in his contemptuous thoughts, a French popinjay. Besides Meg and a poet! If it were another kind of man—a sportsman, an open-air liver, a strong man among men, one could perhaps think of him beside Meg. But a French poet and a mere boy!

"Anyhow I have done my duty," he said to himself, as he strode away; but somehow the thought did not absolve him because he had been glad that Paul was to be sent away.

The winter was setting in and Paul, too, felt that he had stayed long enough.

"My father is lonely," he said to Meg, "and it is time I go south with the swallows. Ah, your beautiful country! Shall I come back, Meg, when the swallows return?"

"Come back, dear Paul, but come with a difference.

How fond I should be of you if you came back and told me you were bringing home a young bride to Château de Neuville!"

She looked at him wistfully, her eyes begging for pardon.

"You hurt me," he said—"besides, it is folly. Would it be kind to offer another the heart where all the altar-lights are lit for you? No then, I shall not vex you, but neither shall I forget. So long as you are not another's, so long shall I hope that you will be mine. The years will not change me."

"Every one will miss you."

"And you, Meg?"

"And I—I most of all."

"Ah, if you were a little less sweet or a little more! What is it your Browning says?—

'Oh, the little more and how much it is;
And the little less and what worlds away!'

He knew hearts, though his method was—a-a-h—to set the teeth on edge!"

"My mother will miss you nearly as much as I."

"I am devoted to her," said the boy, simply.

Meg had walked a little way with him on his homeward road to Killylea.

"We must see much of you," she said tenderly, "while you remain. We have let those people up there engross you ; but, after all, you are my friend."

She felt that she must overwhelm him with ordinary kindness, having refused him the one extraordinary—as though that could atone.

"Now I will turn back ; you have taken me from my work, you know. We shall look for you at tea ; or you may fetch me from the field, perhaps. You will find me where the women are picking stones off the ten-acre patch. Next week we shall be threshing, and tremendously busy. I am glad now that the threshing could not be this week, though I was vexed about it, at first, since it is your last week."

"Let me turn back with you ; it is not right that you come with me."

"No, no ; you will be late for your lunch—besides, working-women are not used to such politeness. Go on, dear Paul ; I will stand here and watch you round the bend of the road."

"But your lunch ?—what of that ?" asked the boy, lingering.

"I had a tremendous breakfast at nine o'clock. I can't go home for another meal between that and tea."

"Ah, Meg, you think of others and forget yourself. It is not right."

"Think of a poet making a fuss over a meal! Go on to yours or you will get none."

"I should go hungry with you then."

"I'll take some food with me to the fields to-morrow, if that will please you. It only happens, though, when the work lies far away from the house."

"Am I to bring le Capitaine Gervase this afternoon?"

"No"—with a sudden flush. "What are the Fitzmaurices to us, Paul? Not a tithe of what you are."

"Very well, then; I shall come alone. Did I tell you my poem makes progress? They are pleased with it, the Capitaine and Mademoiselle Clare. I pray it may be worthy of the Hand."

"It will not be unworthy, I am sure. But now, *au revoir*; I shall look for you about five o'clock."

In the evening, after Paul had left them, Mrs. O'Donoghue suddenly turned to her daughter.

"He has asked you, Meg?" she said; and her face was full of a pleased expectation before which her daughter's heart sank.

"He has asked me many times."

"I am proud of you, Meg, so I am. It's a marriage worthy of the name you bear. You'll be leaving me lonely, child; but I wouldn't stop you for that. I shan't mind sitting here my lone, when I can think of you ruling in a French castle, and repaying me for all the sacrifices I made to make a lady of you."

Meg winced; then she bowed her head as before a coming storm.

"I have refused M. de Neuville," she said quietly.

Mrs. O'Donoghue gazed at her in stupefaction. For a moment she seemed unable to find speech for her thoughts. Then the words came. The voice was as bitter as disappointment could make it.

"You've refused him! May I ask you, girl, if you expect such a chance will ever come to you in this world again? I'll tell you what I think of you: I think you're mad to throw away such a match. Who is there here for you to marry except old bachelors and widowers three times your age—except, maybe, Tony Ryan?"

"I'm not thinking of marrying. I only want to stay with you."

If the intention of this speech had been to soften

the hearer's heart it failed entirely, for Mrs. O'Donoghue answered her with scorn.

"Do you think I reared you, as I did, to see you wearing my old clothes? Do you think I value your company half as much as I should your absence, knowing you would be a fine lady? Sure, I think I was mistaken altogether, and the French training has but given you a lot of foolish notions. I'd have done better to have kept you at home, and married you, when your time came, to Bat Sweeney or Thady O'Rearden."

Meg smiled faintly. She could not imagine herself, under any circumstances, as Mrs. Sweeney or Mrs. O'Rearden. Her mother caught her smile, faint as it was, and grew angrier.

"Oh, you can laugh. But if I hadn't treated you as I did you'd have been married, like many another girl, and never asked if you liked the man; so long as he had money in the bank, and land, and stock, and a jaunting-car, and a parlour, and didn't expect his wife to do nothing but feed the pigs all her days, she was esteemed a lucky girl. I married for love myself, and people shook their heads over me; but I——"—her voice quavered and fell—"I never

repented it. I said I'd never see a girl of mine bought and sold like a calf in the fair. 'Tis all the thanks I get that I'm disappointed and set aside in my old age."

She paused for breath, and Meg found her opportunity.

"You married for love, dear mother. Would you have *me* marry without?"

"There's a deal of nonsense talked about love," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, illogically.

"Do you think I don't know what you did for me, and love you for it? If I had loved M. de Neuville how could I have left you, after all your sacrifices?"

"How!—you're talking nonsense, child," said the mother. "Don't you know I'd be a happy woman seeing you the equal of even the Fitzmaurices? I love you, Meg, though I'm sharp with you; and yet I'd be content to let you go for ever, for what would I do intruding on a great lady—a poor old battered field-woman like myself? Och, I wouldn't have stood in the way; even the little grand-children, if God sent them, I wouldn't ask to see, though my heart might be hungry for them all its days, afraid they'd be thinking what a queer, rough old granny they'd got."

"It is the wrong way of love, little mother."

"It may be, but it is my way. There, you'll go your own way, and it's no use talking about it. What you can want better I'm sure I don't know. Maybe it's Captain Fitzmaurice himself you'll be refusing next."

A sudden wave of colour flowed into Meg's cheeks and ebbed again, leaving her pale; but her mother did not notice; she was absorbed in her lamentations over Paul.

"I'm sure nicer he couldn't be to me, not if I was the finest lady in the land. 'Tisn't likely I'd ever meet his like again, for if you were to marry to please me—and that's not likely now—'twould be some fine gentleman that 'ud just see me as I am, and be ashamed of me for his wife's mother."

"Oh, hush!" said Meg, in a shocked voice. "As if any one would dare to feel in such a way towards you."

"Don't be talking," said her mother; "you don't know the world or human nature at all at all, for all your cleverness."

A few days later Killisky and Killylea were alike lonely for Paul.


CHAPTER XX.

THE REDEMPTION OF TONY.

THE week of the threshing was the last of the fine weather. The golden evening skies of that September, the winged golden clouds flying home to the sunset, might have been the little ghosts of the golden glories of earth which the wet, in one drenching night, had drowned and flooded out of all remembrance.

The summer was quite over, and something seemed to have gone with it. After Paul had left them Captain Fitzmaurice came no more to Killisky, or so little that his strange comings but made his long absences more noticeable. It might have been that Paul had brought him, and that, with Paul's going, his reason for coming had ceased. Since that day he had pleaded for Paul, and been refused, some veil of coldness and estrangement had fallen between those two who used to be frank friends.

The patient Clare had grown tired, at last, of



seeking Meg and finding only Mrs. O'Donoghue, or perhaps the sodden country did not tempt her to those long walks amid leafy lanes which in summer were pleasant; now certainly the feet of horses and the cart-tracks made a deep morass of mud and water not favourable for walking. And Miss Fitzmaurice had grown used to Meg's refusals of her invitations because she was too busy. After all, it mattered little to her who came or went; she was loosening her few ties with earth, since so soon she would fly away, like the dove, and be at rest in that desired hermitage of hers among the dreary, dreary wastes of Notting Dale.

All those months since the spring Meg had seen nothing of the Ryans, nor had Tony made any attempt to renew his courting. Now that Mrs. McGrath was away on her honeymoon, there was little fear of Meg meeting with the Ryans except in the most casual way.

At the fair or market Pat would pass her by with a scowl and an averted eye. At church on Sundays even the holy place could not keep Judy from sending her a malignant glance. She was conscious that Tony, in the same place, watched her with an

expression half-resentment, half-attraction. Tony had no longer power to trouble her; she had to fight with an unhappiness of her own which made minor annoyances fall into insignificance.

The neighbours said that she was following in her mother's footsteps with regard to being stand-off and unfriendly. Mrs. Gleeson, whom she had liked, made no approaches to her; and Meg, feeling that she had been, however unwillingly, concerned in little Mary's unhappiness, had not the courage to seek them out. After all nothing mattered, nothing could make much difference in the eclipse that had seemed to descend on Meg's youth with the rains of autumn.

But she was to be startled into interest in the life about her once again.

She was surveying her cabbage-fields, one afternoon, her farmer's eye dwelling on them with a certain professional pride in them which her shadowy trouble had not power to extinguish. A painter might indeed have looked at them, with signal pleasure, from another point of view, for the field of pale green heads against a slate-grey sky, heavy with rain, had a delightful effect of colour and brilliance.

"They'll be worth a lot," she muttered to herself, "if the winter comes a hard one in England and Scotland; if not, they'll go to the bullocks."

She touched up her pony to move on, but, before she could start, some one came beside her and laid a detaining hand on the reins. It was Tony Ryan.

Her first feeling was one of anger and repulsion. Then a glance at Tony told her that this was no bold and swaggering wooer, but a man in grave trouble. Tony's hat was pushed to the back of his head. His beard and curls, which of old had glistened with hair-oil, were neglected and in disorder; his face was not over-clean; his clothes showed plain traces of the wearer's having lain in them on wet grass. Tony might have been "on a spree," as the phrase goes, but the haggard and bloodshot eyes had no sign in them of the eclipse of drunkenness.

"You needn't be afraid of me," he said, looking up at her miserably. "I'm not goin' to ask you again."

"What is the matter?" she asked, forgetting everything but that he suffered and she was sorry for him. "What has happened to you at all?"

"'Tis little Molly," he said—"little Molly Gleeson,

that I was so fond of before I seen you. I'd have gone back to her since, only for the shame of it. 'Tis dyin' on me she is!"

"Dying! What has come to her?"

"I've killed her. She was always delicate. She never picked up since I threw her over for you. Now 'tis goin' into a decline she is, so the doctor says, and I dursn't go near her to say I'm sorry."

"When did you hear?"

"Last night. I lay below her window all the night; I haven't gone home since."

"Nor eaten anything, I dare say."

"'Tisn't thinkin' about food I am. But, now you name it to me, I've ate nothing and I'm hungry. I don't know why I've come to tell you. Part because you were kind to Molly, part to tell you that it was all my foolishness askin' you. My heart was in Molly all the time."

"Of course it was."

"And you'd never look at me. Didn't you send away the French gentleman that's the finest of Quality in his own country! Every one knows that you did, even my mother, though she holds out that he never gave you the chance."

"You'd better come home with me and have something to eat. I'm just going to my dinner."

"You! The last time I saw you, you looked at me like as if I was the dirt under your feet."

"Never mind the last time. Jump in!"

With a half apology for his stained and disordered clothing he clambered awkwardly into the seat beside her. His new timidity smote her. Was it possible that she had felt such insolent disgust for him that day in the early summer—this poor fellow of the same clay as herself, and now so heavily burdened? Had she not been too hard on his foolish exuberance? It was the china cup and the earthen vessel that float down the stream, side by side, each subject to the same destruction. Nay, the apologue did not hold, for was not she also a vessel of earth, sprung of a race which had long been peasant, no matter what its origin was?

"You will eat a good meal," she said gently; "and then——"

"You will be tellin' me to go home to my mother, but I won't; she has nothin' but a jeer for my little girl. I'll send her word not to be expectin' me till she sees me, if you like; but I won't go home. God knows what her bitter tongue 'ud drive me to do."

"Some one else will take you in?"

"Aye, there are plenty of kindly neighbours."

"When you have had a meal, and tidied yourself up, you will go to the Gleesons."

"In the Name of God, what for?"

Meg bowed her head. "In the Name of God to undo what you have done."

"Tom Gleeson would show me the door, small blame to him!"

"I don't think he will. They are very gentle people, and they will see that you share their sorrow. If they are angry with you, at first, you must bear it. Tell them right out that you've come to see Mary, and ask her to marry you."

"The little girl that's goin' into a decline on them?"

"I think happiness may save her. It is in the hands of God."

He looked at her with wild hope. "They say you've grand education. Will you tell me it's possible?"

"I believe it is possible. There is nothing wrong with her but unhappiness."

"She never had a day's sickness till I put my

shadow across her path. She was as strong as a little pony for all she was so pretty."

"Give her back her happiness, and, with the help of God, you will give her back her health."

"Why, the Lord reward you! I don't care what comes to me so long as she's spared. I was near drownin' myself last night."

"You would have killed her. See how much she cares for you if your leaving her has nearly killed her."

She brought him in by the little green porch, through the tiled hall with its stuffed owls and pheasants—shot by Con O'Donoghue long ago,—past the amazed Bridget Cormack, and up to her mother's sofa.

"This is a man in great trouble, mother," she said; "don't ask him any questions. I want to give him a good meal and send him away. He has something that he must do quickly."

"Sure a neighbour's child is welcome," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, with her natural benevolence, forgetting all her anger against Tony's father and his proposal.

Tony ate ravenously the food that was set before him. When he was satisfied he accepted Meg's

suggestion that he should wash his face, and set himself to rights as much as possible.

"Remember," she said, "you are not going a wild man to startle her, but a lover who would win her."

Something of pleasure and shyness came into Tony's tear-stained face.

"I don't know why you're so good to me at all," he said. "I was an impident fellow to be lookin' after you; but, sure, I'm punished for it. Now say, God speed you!"

"God speed you!" said Meg, heartily. "Come back and tell me how you sped; I shall be hoping and praying. You will find me in Larry's paddock, where the women are picking stones till dark. After that I shall be here."

"I'll come some time," promised Tony.

The dusk had descended on the fields. The patient, stooping figures of the women had straightened themselves, having carried the last apronful of stones to the great central heap. With their shawls gathered about them, they were going home along the causeway which crossed a bit of bog to the village, where, in the grey twilight, the little windows began to twinkle like stars.

Meg jogged home leisurely with a slack rein on the pony's back. Tony's trouble had taken her thoughts from herself. For the first time, for many weeks, she forgot to feel her heart hanging somewhere in her heavy as a stone.

She was still driving along the rough, irregular roadway in her own fields, where every minute a wheel sank in a deep rut while the other was lifted high on a ridge, when she saw a man coming towards her springily, as though an occasional boulder in his path was something to be leapt for pleasure. She pulled up and waited, her heart full of sympathetic joy. There was no room for doubt as to whether Tony brought good or bad news.

"Well?" she said, leaning towards him, the last stormy rift in the sky suddenly lighting up her golden hair and the deeps of her eyes.

"They hadn't a cross word for me," he panted. "God bless them, 'twas for comfortin' me they were, after a bit. And I seen her. There wasn't much to say between us. Divil a thing I said at all, as well as I can remember, but she understood me all the same. She was sittin' up, lookin' so weeshy, in a great big chair. She wasn't the weight of a child

when I lifted her up in my two arms; but, sure, in a few minutes 'twas feedin' her I was, no less. She'd turned against her food, my poor little girl; but, sure, she took it from my hand, and laughed to think of my feedin' her. 'Twas the first time she laughed for months, they said."

"Good," said Meg, delightedly. "And now what next?"

"I'm goin' home to tell them."

"What?"

"That I'll marry her within the month if the priest has to be brought to her bedside."

"She'll be able to go to the church like any other bride. She only wanted a little happiness."

"I believe it, God reward you! I'd never have had the courage to do it only for you."

"You're not afraid of this battle—with your father and mother, I mean?"

"I've heart for anything now. But there needn't be any fear. I've always ruled the two of them. The Gleasons are terrible glad at gettin' me; they know I could have had the pick of the country, though yourself refused me."

Well, well; there was no use expecting a quite

new Tony all at once. Meg laughed in enjoyment as the familiar conceit put up its head.

"They don't know that I refused you."

"You didn't tell them? I thought you'd be for spreadin' the news everywhere."

"I told no one who could possibly talk about it. The Gleesons needn't know."

"Now that was handsome of you." Tony breathed a relieved sigh. "I often wondered why they hadn't the laugh against me. The Gleesons needn't know, but maybe I ought to tell Molly?"

He looked at her appealingly, and she laughed again merrily.

"There's no need for that," she said. "Perhaps it would only hurt her."

"You're right," said Tony, slapping his knee. "'Tis a secret I'm bound to keep from her out of regard for the little girl herself, even if I'm burstin' with it."

Tony's boast with regard to his parents seemed to have more foundation than much of his boasting, for he and Mary Gleeson were actually married within the month, and Tony brought home his bride to a very snug little farm and farmhouse which his father had hastily secured for him.

Mary appeared at the church like a snowdrop which has just put its head above the snow, in her warm wedding-frock of white woollen and swan's-down. But she was not long, even apparently, an invalid; and it was very soon evident that she was going to discredit the predictions of Dr. McGrath's *locum tenens* about the decline, so it was well the gentleman's time at the Kilcolman Dispensary was to be a short one, for there were a good many sarcastic things said about him.

Judy Ryan made a startling right-about-face in her opinion of her daughter-in-law. She declared everywhere that her heart had always been in the match for Tony, and that his father was the very same. Also, that if one thing was required to complete her satisfaction, it was that the machinations of the O'Donoghues, mother and daughter, to secure her son had been so entirely set at naught.

Meg need not have been afraid, after all, that Mrs. Tony would retain any jealousy of her, or that Molly's mother would remember Tony's fleeting infatuation against her. On the contrary, she soon discovered in the very sweet manner of mother and

daughter to herself a curious little touch of pity, something almost apologetic, as though there was something for which she needed atonement; and this, for a while excited her wonder. She never dreamt that they attributed the slight dimming of her beauty and spirit to the loss of Tony, that glorious youth whom they, unworthy, had carried off from all other competitors. Tony had a slight air of shamefacedness in those early days when he and Meg met. Perhaps he felt the need of confession which had not been made; perhaps he had even—well, Tony must be Tony, after all!

Yet, if there was one thing in which he finally disappointed his mother, it was in the amazing capacity for domesticity he discovered in his married life. Tender attentions to the wife of one's bosom were practically unknown things in Kilcolman, and a matter, in Tony's case, for some rude jesting. Nor did it make things better when, later on, he displayed an aptitude for nursing his babies, which gave actual scandal to the countryside. The one bitter thing Judy was known to say about Tony's wife, whose gentleness would indeed have disarmed the hardest, was that it was a queer thing, in Judy's opinion, to

see Molly turning her husband into a woman, and not ashamed of it.

"Many a time," she said, "I thought I'd faint under the weight of Tony himself when he was little. But is it Pat to take him off my arm, or me to let him do it? I'd rather see a man any day makin' a show of himself with the drink, so long as he didn't go too far entirely, than makin' a molly of himself trapesin' about carryin' a child."

And, curiously enough, this way of thinking was not an isolated one among the matrons of Kilcolman.

CHAPTER XXI.

“THERE IS SOME ONE ELSE.”

It was a rainy winter, and even among her fields, Meg felt the loneliness and sadness of the rain-mists hiding the hills and blown like smoke about the low-lying pastures. A perpetual line of mist marked the course of the river; wet hedges and wet roads mirrored the magnificent skies in the stormy evenings. All creatures of the open air found it uncomfortable weather, and Meg, often sodden, not least among them.

Her friends still were absent or estranged. Mrs. McGrath was yet on her long honeymoon, and in Paris, whence, she assured Meg, she was going to return a young woman.

“Tom has persuaded me,” she wrote, with tender mockery of herself, “that I am a girl again, and faith, my dear, I’m going to break every looking-glass in the Red House as soon as I get back. Sure it’s

the crackedness, and the crookedness, and the dimness of them have been telling me lies about myself all those years. To be sure, in this city of looking-glasses, I often meet an old woman walking along beside Tom, but I just drop her a curtsy, and I say to her, 'Ah, where have you been hiding yourself these last couple of months, ma'am? For sure I used to know you quite well, or else you remind me of some one I used to know.' And, though she curtsys back to me, never a word she says in reply."

Germaine was silent, in a rapture of silence Meg could well imagine, lying through these winter days with her young son on her arm.

The Counsellor yet paid his little cheerful visits to Killisky, dropping in, in Meg's absence, for a chat with her mother, and coming, when the girl was to be found, with his constant little gifts for her—a new book, or a basket of grapes, or a bunch of hot-house flowers. But the Counsellor was everybody's friend.

Still Captain Fitzmaurice stayed away. Meg, meeting him now in fair or market, and sore at heart because the protection and the companionship of old were withdrawn, could not conceal the hurt coldness

of her manner whenever they happened to meet face to face. It was not very often, for he made no opportunities to talk with her as of old. Full of vague pain, Meg would acknowledge his lifted hat from a distance; but, even so, she could see that he looked sterner than of old, and that the dust of grey seemed to gather more thickly on his closely cropped dark head.

She nerved herself to speak of his estrangement to her mother, dreading the subject, yet fearing to have her approach it first.

"I met Captain Fitzmaurice in the fair, this morning," she said, one day.

"'Twould be good for sore eyes to see him," replied her mother. "He doesn't drop in now as he used."

"He doesn't look well. He has a tired way with him, and he's growing grey fast."

"Mercy on us, what's making him grey? I'm twenty years older than him, and I haven't a grey hair in my head," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, smoothing her black tresses with pardonable pride.

"Ah, but you've had such an easy life, little mother," said Meg, with wistful gaiety.

"Maybe his marriage is off," Mrs. O'Donoghue suggested.

"Surely not. The engagement was to be announced as soon as Miss Egerton came back from Scotland. I think they're expecting her this week."

"He'll be missing her, maybe."

"She's often away, mother."

"So she is. 'Twill be a deal off his mind when the pretty little lady's money comes into Killylea."

"I suppose they are poor?"

"They've been poor this many a day, and he's dropped a deal of money in the place. Maybe 'twill come back to him, maybe not. The Counsellor was telling me that he'd get a power of money if he'd let the place; but he's too proud."

"Ah, well, if he's going to marry an heiress he needn't sacrifice his prejudices; and for the rest, let him go or stay as he will. What can it matter to us? He is not of our world, nor we of his."

At the moment this conversation was taking place over the breakfast table at Killisky, spread late to satisfy the healthy appetite of the young mistress, who had been out since early morning, Mabel Egerton was tapping at the door of her cousin's study.

"May I come in, Gervase?" she asked timidly,
"or are you too busy to have a talk with me?"

"Am I ever too busy for you, Mabel?"

"Ah, but I want a good long talk; and you mustn't
let your eye wander to the hands of the clock."

"Do I ever do that? I must be a very rude
and dull fellow if I do."

The girl brushed his speech aside, as if she wished
to get on to other topics. Indeed, as she sat in
the chair he had sit for her, and watched him
making a quill pen while he waited for her to speak,
the beating of her heart, she thought, must be as
audible as the ticking of the very business-like
clock on the mantelshelf, where her photograph
stood among the fishing-flies, and tobacco-boxes, and
the many untidy belongings of a man's den.

"I wonder if you are very fond of me, Gervase,"
she began.

"Why, sweetheart, have I ever given you cause
to doubt it?" Leaning over, he kissed a tendril of
her hair.

She shrank from the caress swiftly. "I know
you are fond of me," she said. "I am always little
Mabel to you, as much as I was when you were a

big boy of sixteen and I a tiny girl of six, and you let me follow you in your expeditions—tiresome little bother that I must have been,—and carried me when I fell asleep or got tired, and comforted me when I was cross, and fed me when I was hungry.”

“Yes, you are always that little Mabel,” said Fitzmaurice, with a tender look, as though the memory had touched him.

“I know; but I don’t know, Gervase, that you have ever yet said that you loved me.”

“I asked you to marry me.”

“Ah, I know. You felt you loved me enough for that; but I was really the only girl. Despite your soldiering, and your more than thirty years, you are a very unsophisticated person. You have known very few women.”

“I thought I had found all the beauties and perfections in one.”

“Ah, don’t laugh! I want to talk seriously. Gervase—Gervase, I should be almost glad to hear you say you did not love me.”

She had stood up from her chair in agitation, and he, turning to look at her, a little pale and stern, stood up too.

"Now you are angry with me," she said; "and I am afraid of you."

"Don't be afraid of me," he answered her. "I have never given you cause yet."

"Ah, but I am afraid now. I have something to tell you, Gervase."

He took her hands and held them. They were cold.

"Now, tell me," he said, "and do not tremble so. See, I shall be kind whatever it is. I could not bear a woman to be frightened of me, and you least of all. What is it, little girl?"

"It is——"

"Go on. Have you been spending too much money?"

"I should not be afraid to tell you that, though you are my guardian."

"What then, dear child?"

"Ah, Gervase, I want you to give me up—to release me from our engagement."

"Why, Mabel?"

The firm clasp of his hand never wavered, and under its reassurance she grew brave.

"I don't think you love me, with the one special

love, though I know that if we had married you would never have let me miss it. But I won't put it on to that. Perhaps, if I had felt sure of myself, I should have been glad to have married you, even on those terms."

She hurried out her words breathlessly yet with agitated pauses between.

"How long," he asked quietly, "is it since you have become dissatisfied with my feeling for you?"

"I don't know. Laura suggested it to me in her clever, secret way when she was here; but I should not have heeded Laura—I trusted you too much, Gervase,—only that later I—I found out the difference myself. Perhaps I knew it even then."

"I don't think that Mdlle. Laura could have discovered any lack in me. Let us leave her out of the question; I did not trust her."

"Yes; I am sure you are right," broke in the girl, hastily. "She was not what I thought her; she was not trustworthy. She said that Meg O'Donoghue was engaged to marry that young Frenchman, Paul de Neuville. It was not true, as we found out later for ourselves. It is only one thing, but it is an indication. For, after

all, Meg resisted every one, and would not marry him."

"It is not our affair," said the Captain, stiffly ;
"and you have not finished your story to me."

"Only this, Gervase—there is—there is some one else."

"How long has there been some one else ?"

"Don't look at me like that. You don't think I, an engaged girl, played fast-and-loose with my word. He did not know I was engaged, and since he has known he has let me be. He is the soul of honour."

"Who is he ?"

"Roger Fry, the son of the people I have been staying with."

"Are you sure this time, Mabel ? Don't make a mistake a second time."

"Ah, Gervase, I am sure ; there will never be anything else for me. I am so fond of you, and I was so young ; it was easy for me to make a mistake. I mistook my love for you, and Clare, and this old house, and my pride in the family, and my faith in and honour for you, for a feeling I had no experience of. There is no man like you, Gervase."

"Hush!" he said, touching her cheek with his finger. "What would *he* say?"

"He'd never think himself a patch upon you. He is just a shy, honest, stupid young soldier—your own profession; but I love him, Gervase, I love him."

"As you have never loved me."

"Your wife is waiting for you, Gervase—waiting to be won," she whispered hurriedly. And then, with a new thought, "Ah, if I could give you my stupid money to spend! We shall not want it. I used to love to think it would build up—help to build up Killylea."

"Hush!" he said again. "What has money to do with you and me?"

"And you forgive me?"

"I forgive you, Mabel; I do not suppose you could help it. I am glad it makes it easier for you that we had not announced our engagement."

"And for you."

"It does not matter. I live in a little world, and its gossip would never reach me; I should not mind if it did. You are sure he—your lover—is worthy?"

"You will know him for yourself. He is brave,

and true, and honourable. His father is a self-made man—we shall have no cause to be ashamed of him—but his mother is a lady. She was only a poor governess when his father married her, and lifted her out of white slavery to be the mistress of a palace. He has no glorious traditions like you, Gervase; but he is a gentleman."

"One cannot be more than that."

"But you—what will you do? You will be hampered because my wretched money will not, after all, come to you. I wish you would have some of it, Gervase. I shall be my own mistress in a few days, and we shall not need it."

"It is out of the question."

"It is useless to talk when you look at me like that. But—borrow some."

"I could not repay it, child."

The girl wrung her hands. "Is all the love, and care, and hospitality of this roof to give me no claim to do anything?"

"You have done much. How lonely it would have been, all these years, without you—lonely for me and Clare."

"You will have to drop your work presently for

want of funds. You see, I am a business woman, and know so much. You would not let Killylea?"

"I said 'No' before, Mabel."

"But this makes a difference. Sir Joseph Fry would take it for a long period of years. It will be a great, lonely place for you and Clare."

"I prefer not to let it."

"Ah, but you are obstinate! It is a bitter drop in my cup of happiness that you should need the money."

"And nothing at all that I should want for you."

"If you had loved me, Gervase, I could hardly have given you up, even for Roger."

CHAPTER XXII.

LOVE AND PRIDE.

THE nine-days' wonder of Miss Egerton's sudden engagement and marriage was long over in Kilcolman, where, indeed, the gossips had made up their minds that, in scenting a love-affair between Captain Fitzmaurice and his ward, they had been utterly mistaken. Captain Fitzmaurice looked no jilted man in the glimpses they caught of him in public places; and at the Castle things went on much as usual, the master being abroad about his business and Clare left to her work among the poor, and to her delicate spiritual tasks and relaxations. She seemed, for the time being, to have put aside her strange dream of happiness.

To one pair of eyes, that watched him from a distance with anxious tenderness, he had looked a little more harassed and careworn during the weeks that elapsed between the announcement of his ward's engagement and her marriage. But perhaps the

eyes were over-anxious, for afterwards the Captain certainly seemed to have gained in springiness of step and buoyancy of air, so that it was whispered about that some secret piece of good luck must have befallen him.

This view received confirmation in the fact, that whereas he had spoken definitely to Lanty Doolan, his steward, of giving up the reclamation works, he had afterwards decided that they were to go on. For this relief he was indebted to his uncle Theobald, the Counsellor, who had come to him one day with his usual beaming benevolence of aspect.

"What's this about giving up the bog, my boy?" he had asked.

"I fear I shall have to do something of the kind," the Captain replied gloomily. "I have no more money to put into it."

"But I have."

"You, Uncle Toby?"

"Yes—I! Are you inclined to take me for a partner?"

"It is a losing game. I have found it so myself, and I have no right to take your money on a chance of its coming back again."

"Nonsense, boy. It will be yours in a few years, at most—yours and Clare's. I have tied up her part of it; but your own part you are welcome to. I have faith in your ultimate success."

"I am glad of it, Uncle Toby. You are among the very few."

"My friend, Mrs. O'Donoghue, is another."

"She wishes me well, I know, and she is a clever, practical woman."

"And that fine girl of hers. She puts all the ordinary pretty women out of court; she is the daughter of light and air. And you will take the money, Gervase?"

"Thank you, Uncle Toby. I will let you sink a certain amount of capital, no more. After that, if I don't begin to see daylight through the scheme, I shall give it up."

"No fear of that, my boy," the old fellow said cheerfully, departing immediately to pay over to his nephew's account in the Kilcolman Bank a sum which certainly gave the reclamation its chance.

After that the Captain came again to Killisky, taking up the old intimacy as if it had never dropped. He came in and out as of old, without

apparently any design of finding Meg at home, for his visits as often as not were paid during her absence.

His unconsciousness made it easy for the girl to resume the intimacy at the point of severance. He was a very welcome visitor to her mother, who was not a little proud of being so well able to entertain the landlord that he could sit an hour or two by her chair in the chimney-corner without seeming to notice the passage of time.

"The dear knows," she said to Meg, "if it wasn't for him I'd hear nothing of how things were going. 'Tis as good almost as being there myself to hear him tell what way this one or that one's cattle sold in the fair, and the prospects for potatoes, and what sort of a year it's like to be for the hay. Bits out o' the papers he does be reading me when you're not thinking you've got a mother at all at all. Och, indeed, he's real kind and pleasant, that's what he is entirely."

"He gets before me with the news, that's what he does, mother dear," Meg would say. "And, when I come home to you, all I could tell you is stale."

"Well, never mind; with the blessing of God I'll be getting about a bit myself come spring. The doctor thinks me wonderful improved, and says that as soon as the weather's dry, I may be taking a little jaunt about the place if my old joints will stand it."

"I'll tell you what, little mother, as soon as ever we get a dry spell I'll take you out myself, with plenty of blankets about you and well propped up with pillows, and I leading Mop, afraid he'd be too frisky at the sight of you. We'll go as far over the land as you feel able for. And, later on, I'm going to get you a little bath-chair of your own, and you can drive yourself about with the old pony harnessed to it."

"It would be real nice," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, smiling. "But wouldn't it be expensive, Meg?"

"The cost of the chair, that's all. We have the little beast, and 'twill be a charity to give him just so much to do as will keep his hoofs from growing."

"Ay, so it will; and then I can keep my eye on you, Meg."

"See that I'm not making ducks and drakes of everything?"

"Indeed, I'm often anxious," said the mother, simply. "You are young, and young people go too fast. The Captain thinks well of your farming ; that's a comfort to me."

"He leads you by the nose," said Meg, laughing.

"I've a deal of confidence in him, and he in me. I'm sometimes glad he didn't marry Miss Mabel. He couldn't have been the same with a fashionable wife, and the fine company she'd bring about him."

"I thought her very sweet and simple."

"She was that. She wanted to be friends with you, but you gave her no encouragement. Empty pride, I call it, Meg, for you're as good as she is, though the O'Donoghues haven't their rights."

"I hadn't time," said the girl, a little wearily.

The mother looked at her, and then changed the subject.

"All the same she couldn't have been expected to be satisfied with the life the Captain likes. Sure there's not a bit o' stir or life in the old house. He's as simple as a boy, or he wouldn't be satisfied with it. 'Tis too lonely-like, with the nearest gentleman half a dozen miles away."

"He thinks nothing of the distance riding. Mr.

Bruce, Mr. Esmonde, and the officers at Cahirmee make society for him, and I don't think he cares for balls or parties."

"He'll have to go to them, then," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, "or how is he ever to find the lady with the fortune to build up Killylea?"

It was a February afternoon, clear and sweet. The snowdrops were out in the garden, and the ditches were full of celandines. There was a robin singing as Meg walked home under leafless boughs, behind which there was a cold, brilliant sunset; but that day the blackbird had sung his first song, and soon the robin's little wintry note would be drowned in the choir.

The air was full of the promise of spring, and Meg, walking along briskly, felt verse after verse of poetry rise to her lips. Suddenly, as she turned a corner, she came upon Captain Fitzmaurice smoking a cigar and looking unusually at leisure.

"I waited for you, Miss Meg," he said; "I should never have overtaken you. From what your mother said, I guessed you would come this way."

"I did not know you were a gentleman at leisure," said Meg, gaily, though her heart was beating fast.

"I am more than usually so at present," he answered seriously. "For Clare has gone to visit Mrs. Fry, and has taken even Toutou with her. You would be sorry for me at my solitary meals, which Mrs. Delany insists on serving to me in state. I assure you I can eat nothing under such conditions. I wish you'd let me have Snap to keep me company."

"I'm sure if my mother knew she would offer you a slice of her chicken."

"I could eat it all, Miss Meg."

"I wouldn't allow you, Captain Fitzmaurice; I have a robust appetite. Besides, we have two chickens this evening, I know, for I overheard the preliminaries of execution most unwillingly. 'Oh dear, dear,' I heard Bridget say, in tones of self-pity, as she chased them here and there, 'any wan 'ud think a chicken never was ate before to hear the talk yez have over it.'"

"Take me home, Miss Meg," said Fitzmaurice, imploringly. "I promise only to ask for a leg if you will invite me to dinner. I am so hungry that I really can't walk to Killylea."

"Very well, then," said the girl, laughing, "since you invite yourself."

She looked radiant in this mood of high spirits, an uncommon one with her, and the man looked at her with admiration. The western sun was full upon her now, and the light had wrapped her head in an aureole, and set up soft, steadfast fires in the depths of her eyes.

"See, there is Kilylea," she said. "How black the mass of it is against the light! All except the turret where the Hand is, and that the sun has flooded with gold."

"Would you let Kilylea, Miss Meg, if it were yours?"

"It would be hard; but then it would not pass away from you. The Hand would have to find another habitation."

"Yes; it would go with me wherever I went."

"You think of letting?"

"Six months ago I would have said it was impossible. I am an unsteadfast fellow; but, lately, I have begun to contemplate the possibility. The strongest of all motives has driven me so far."

The girl looked at him.

"Want of money?" she asked.

"Worse than that, Meg; want of you. Shall I let it? It rests with you to say."

The sun dropped behind Killylea, and the road was cold. He arrested her steps and caught her hands in his.

"It rests with you, Meg. What is the place or any place to me compared with you? Do you love me, Meg? Do you love me? Give me a kiss, Meg."

The hands trembled in his like a frightened bird, but she averted her face from his ardent approach.

"I love you," she said very low—then she pushed him from her—"but I will not marry you."

The lover laughed out scornfully. "Midsummer madness, my Meg. For if you love me—and you do, my sweet!—what power on earth shall keep us apart?"

"My will."

"Not so strong as your love, my pretty one. But why should it be set against your lover?"

She saw that he was not taking her refusal seriously, and she turned on him a glance full of entreaty.

"Listen to me, Captain Fitzmaurice!"

"Gervase, my sweet."

"Very well then—Gervase, for once. But I will not marry you. You must marry some one who will save Killylea for you ; some one with family, and money, and position. You owe it to your race, Gervase. Every one would cry out against such a *mésalliance* as your marrying me. They would call it so, though I have royal blood in my veins. Every one here knows that my father died of his own sin. I should be bringing you that disgrace too."

"Many of my ancestors were six-bottle men, and lay where they fell every night till some one carried them to bed. They were men of fashion, and no one talked of drunkards in those days. We are pretty equal on that score, Meg."

"The world does not allot its blame equally."

"The little world of Kilcolman, Meg !"

"It is all the world I have. And we could not live beyond its praise or blame."

"Much we should hear of it, you and I, in paradise."

"You would let Killylea for me, but I know it would be an immeasurable sacrifice. I will not take it from you, Gervase."

"You will take it one of these days, if you will not now."

"Why," she said. "My will is as strong as yours. And you will see, in time, that you should not set the love of a girl against what you owe to your race. Look at my hard hands. Are they fit for the mistress of Killylea?"

"We would work together, Meg—you and I. It would be Eden over again."

"What would the Hand bid you do?"

"It would bid me be true to myself."

"I read it differently."

"Very well, then," he said. "You will not be mine, but I am yours. And Time will do the rest. So you will not kiss me, Meg? Ah, you are hard-hearted, child; but one of these days I shall make you give me many kisses for the one you refuse to-day."

CHAPTER XXIII.

FIRE.

KILLYLEA had now a fascination for Meg more than ever, because for its sake she had refused her own happiness. She would stand, at times, on an upland and look away towards it with a sheltering and protecting feeling that was almost motherly because she had done, had relinquished so much for it.

She did not doubt herself that her decision was final; but Fitzmaurice's attitude somewhat perturbed her. He came and went as of old, and his manner towards her had resumed the old friendly calm. But now and again he directed a look at her which said, "Remember I am waiting;" and the quiet pressure of his hand on hers seemed to convey to her the same assurance of untiring patience.

It was a tender April afternoon, about two months after she had refused Gervase Fitzmaurice. She had been superintending once again the removal of some lambs and sheep from the sheltered pastures to

the higher mountainous land. She had seen them driven off by the herd and his preternaturally clever dog, and had listened, long after they were out of sight, to the baby-crying of the little lambs and the deep answers of the mothers.

The gate to which she had left Mop fastened was at the top of a high field, below which the country swept in a gradual descent to the river. On the other side of the slope were the castle woods, and, dark in a gap among the leafless trees, the towers and battlements of the castle.

Mop was cropping a sweet piece of grass as Meg stepped into the little pony-cart. He waited with some apprehension for the pull at the reins which should interrupt his feast; but it delayed in coming. Meg, alone and unobserved, sat watching the home of glorious memories which might have been hers, if she would, but which she had put away from her, she believed, for ever.

Presently she would go back to Killisky in time to have tea with her mother, who would be alone, she guessed, that afternoon. She had seen Captain Fitzmaurice ride by in the morning to a town at a distance, and the Counsellor had mentioned that he

had business in Kilcolman that afternoon. She might dream now a little while undisturbed, with none to see her absorption, for the wide stretch of country was lonely.

Suddenly, as she brooded, with her face and heart towards Killylea, a sudden glare came in one of the low windows, as though the sunset had caught and fired its blackness. For an instant she did not realize what it was. Then she cried aloud suddenly—a cry of such sharp anguish and alarm that Mop lifted his head and looked towards his mistress in amazement.

Another instant and she had the reins in her hands, and the little pony's head turned towards the gate. A little more, and they were flying down the hilly road at a pace Mop had never attained before in all his mortal days.

At the foot of the hill, where there was a cottage, Meg pulled up breathlessly. The woman of the house came to the door holding up her hands.

"The Castle's on fire, Mrs. Cassidy!" Meg gasped, "and Captain Fitzmaurice is away at the Road Sessions at Crossmany. Send the children everywhere to warn the neighbours. The place may be

saved if there is enough help. Fly, Timmy, and Paddy, and Larry!"

But the urchins, delighted with their sensational bit of news, were already scattered in all directions.

At every cottage she passed Meg repeated her warning. The gate of Killylea, when she came to it, was open, and the lodge-keeper's open door showed an empty house. She could see many figures racing through the park, hurry-scurry, from all directions. There would be plenty of willing hands, if unskilled ones. But, oh! if Captain Fitzmaurice were himself there, cool and steady, to command them, the old place might be saved yet!

Fast as she had come the fire had travelled faster. She passed the cool and smiling gardens, so unconscious, it seemed, of the danger of the house, and, coming out on the lawn, she found a mass of people staring helplessly at the west turret, the base of which was already a pillar of fire.

Old Peter the butler, and Mrs. Delany the housekeeper, stood wringing their hands in the midst of a sympathetic group, watching the flames leaping from one window to another inside the building. Far above, the chamber of the turret that held Sir

Maurice's Hand waited for its doom, bathed still in the blue and gold of the April afternoon. The air was full of the roar of the furnace within the walls.

"Are all these men doing nothing?" cried Meg, as she flung Mop's reins to a young Cassidy, who, having spread his message, had yet arrived on the scene quicker than herself.

"Och, wirra, wirrasthrue!" cried one of the old servants. "There's nothin' to be done but to watch the place burn down before our eyes, and the Captain away, an' the Hand he'd give his life to save the first thing to burn."

"Oh," cried Meg, with a cry that was like a prayer, "if there were only some one with a head! There's a fire-engine, isn't there, somewhere? And these men ought to be carrying water instead of standing idle."

"The engine-house is locked and the Captain has the key."

"Break in the doors!" cried Meg. And then, with a deep sigh of satisfaction, "Ah! here is some one at last."

The some one was Mrs. McGrath and her Tom, arriving briskly on the scene, looking, in their

coolness and freedom from flurry, a refreshing contrast to the agitated mass of humanity around her.

"Here, some of you fellows, come with me till we break in the door and get out the fire-engine," the doctor said, picking out half-a-dozen men. "And Maria, my dear, just get them in a line to pass the buckets. Keep your wits about you, men, and we'll save the old place yet."

The men, willing and alert, now there was some one to lead them, fell into line.

"If the water will hold," said a voice at Meg's elbow, "they will save the Castle; but the turret is lost."

Meg, who had been listening half-dazed to the noise of the fire and the shouts of the men who were battering down the door of the engine-house, and to the quick orders of Mrs. McGrath to her volunteers, turned sharply to the speaker.

"And the Hand of the Crusader will burn with it, Tim Cassidy," she said.

"It will; a thousand pities it is. 'Twon't be Killylea without it; and 'twill break the Captain's heart."

"Is no one going to try to save it?"

"Sure, if it was a livin' thing some one might give his own life for the chance. But 'twould be suicide—no less."

"Listen, Tim Cassidy, now, and keep your wits about you. I am going to try; and as soon as you see me enter the house, run and tell them to bring the ladders lest the floor shouldn't last me to come back."

"Glory be to God, you're gone mad, Miss Meg!"

"Hush! Do as I tell you. Ah! here's the engine. As soon as they get it in place tell Dr. McGrath I'm in the house."

She was gone like a young fawn. Before she went she had measured the house with her eye, and seen the way she must take. The hall door stood open, as it had been left by panic, and the old hall within was full of the afternoon sun. On the sill of the great window, at the head of the staircase, the doves were crooning. The contrast with the fire and fury a few yards away smote Meg's heart like a sword.

She fled lightly up the staircase. She did not know the upper part of the house, but it was built simply—no winding passages and unexpected turns,

but cool, high though narrow corridors going off the head of each flight of stairs to the wings of the house.

On the fifth floor Meg paused an instant to take breath. Then she turned the handle of the door of noble wine-red mahogany which shut off the corridor, and met the hot air and the smoke.

A few steps and the smoke was all about her, suffocating her. The noise of the fire was everywhere, and the floor was hot. The plaster was cracking on the walls in a thousand directions, and she knew that the fire was under her feet. Blind and stupefied, she pushed open the door of the turret-room and went in.

She had wit to close it after her as she entered. It was full of thin volumes of smoke blown hither and thither by the wind from the four windows that stood open. The turret-room was clear of the fire, and the heat and noise seemed more distant. As she cast one quick glance around she could see the country lying under her, green and peaceful. In that supreme moment she thought of nothing—not of her mother, nor her lover—but only of how the Hand might be saved.

The smoke came thicker and faster, and she heard

the shouting below. The flames were bursting from the turret windows underneath her and licking with impotent tongues the strong stone tower.

Then Meg saw through the smoke the shrine standing solitary on its marble table in the middle of the room. She had not thought so to see it for the first time. She took it in her arms and carried it to the window. It was of solid silver, and the carving of it was sharp against her breast. But she did not feel it. She only thought that, at the worst, the shrine would preserve its relic uninjured if she were to let it fall from the window.

As she appeared in the window-frame there was a great shout from the crowd below. She stood a second and then fell back. The flames had burst from the window below her, and the heat scorched her face. As she stood there she realized that the floor under her feet, at any moment, might burst into flame.

She got to the door and opened it, but a rush of fire drove her back. Helplessly she looked from side to side through the fumes of the smoke. She felt her flesh begin to scorch; but it was as if she were under chloroform. The smoke had begun to do its merciful work.

As she sank to the ground with her breast on the shrine of the Hand, Gervase Fitzmaurice leapt through the window into the room. He groped for her on the floor and found her; then through the smoke made his way back to another window. As he reached it the air blew in his face, reviving him. He shifted the girl from one arm to another, and then climbed over the sill on to the top rung of the ladder standing there.

"Thank God," he said out aloud, as he drew the girl after him, "they opened no windows this side of the tower!"

It was no light thing to descend with an unconscious girl swinging from his arm, and with one hand only to grasp the ladder; but Gervase Fitzmaurice achieved the descent in safety. As he neared the ground a hundred hands were extended to receive his burden, but he waved them off abruptly.

"I am all right," he said. "Send Dr. McGrath to see to her."

While he stood there with Meg in his arms the doctor, grimy and damp, came rushing up.

"It was the grandest thing I ever heard of," he

said. "And we've saved your house, Captain Fitzmaurice, though the tower must go. Here, let me see the heroine!"

"She has held the shrine all the time," said the Master of Killylea. "No man could have carried two more precious burdens."

"H'm!" said the doctor; "and the shrine of this intrepid young spirit the more precious by far."

Except that her feet were scorched Meg was uninjured, and the doctor declared that in a few hours' time she would be able to return to Killisky. Meanwhile, the connection between the west wing and the house had been cut, and the fire in the turret was burning itself out.

"It was very lucky you came in time, Captain Fitzmaurice," said the doctor afterwards—"though, mind you, I'd have gone after her myself if you hadn't come that minute. Still, that tower room looked a particularly uninviting spot just at the moment you vanished into it; and, mind you, I shouldn't have liked that climb down with a fine, well-grown girl like Miss Meg swinging out of me, to say nothing of your ancestor's shrine."

"It was very lucky I came," repeated the Captain.

"Some one would have done it, I am sure; but I could not have forgiven myself if it were any other man but myself. Meanwhile, let us have a wash, McGrath; we are like a pair of niggers. Ah, Mrs. McGrath," turning to that lady, "how am I to thank you and your husband? You've saved my house."

"You needn't have been thanking me much if you had not saved Meg. Frankly, Captain Fitzmaurice, your ancestor's Hand even wasn't worth it."

"Great heavens!" cried the Captain, "nothing would be worth it. And if I hadn't succeeded in saving her I should have died with her."

The pair of wedded lovers looked at each other significantly.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SURRENDER.

MEG lay on her mother's sofa with her blistered feet swathed in bandages. Mrs. O'Donoghue was bustling about, forgetting her rheumatism in her excitement over her daughter's heroism.

"That I should live to see the day my Meg 'ud save the Crusader's Hand for the Fitzmaurices," she kept repeating at intervals. And then she would add to herself exultantly, "But, sure, as the Counsellor said long ago, race will show."

"If it was a little bit heroic," said Meg—"and, perhaps, since everybody says it was, it must have been—what was it, the impulse of a moment, to your heroism of years, little mother?"

"Ah, don't be talking about that," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, abashed. "Sure, what's the use of calling a woman fine names for doing what a common labouring man does every day?"

Meg saw that only the lesser heroism of her mother's life was remembered, and said no more.

"The Captain will be down fine and early, asking after you," said the proud little woman; "and I wonder the Counsellor's not here before. And Miss Clare, too! What'll she be saying when she hears how you saved the Hand? Oh! dear, dear, 'tis the great day for Killisky!"

But Meg, a little pale with the pain of her scorched feet, only answered, with apparent indifference, that the Captain would be kept very busy, that the embers of the fire would need careful watching lest it should break out again, and that, therefore, they need not expect him to call very soon.

However, a little later, when Mrs. O'Donoghue had retired to have a rest, the Captain came in and stood a moment very big against the low window, and a little blinded by the dimness after the bright sunlight outside.

"Well," he said, drawing a chair close to her sofa, "and how is the heroine?"

"Feeling particularly foolish at having to lie like this when she is in rude health."

"And the heroic feet?"

"They will be well in a day or two, and the only suffering that will remain will be to hear myself called names that do not belong to me."

"Well, I won't call you a heroine any more then. My pride and joy in you will be none the less."

The proud possessiveness of his tone embarrassed the girl.

"You are glad I saved the Hand for you?" she said shyly.

"*Glad* is a poor way of putting it. We should hardly be Fitzmaurices without the Hand."

"I thought of that when I went. The fire is out, Captain Fitzmaurice?"

"The fire is beyond doing further harm."

"But the turret? It can be rebuilt?"

"Uncle Toby has offered to rebuild it. He is a Fitzmaurice, and has a right to do it, so I did not refuse him. He says he will sink a brass tablet in the wall to say how you saved the Hand."

"You all make too much of it. I should hate the fuss, only it gives my mother such joy. At last she is pleased with me."

"The Hand was leading us all the time, Meg. The Hand has brought us together."

"Ah no, Captain Fitzmaurice."

"Ah yes, Meg. You saved it for yourself as well as for me; for us and for our children. But if I had lost you in saving it, what would the world have been to me?"

"I told you I would not marry you, Captain Fitzmaurice."

"And I laughed at you, Meg. What was your girl's pride against my love?—and against your love, Meg?"

She turned her face to the wall, and did not answer him.

"I would not urge then, Meg, what I urge now. I saved your life two years ago when you would have gone over the weir. I saved you from the fire yesterday, you splendid child. Your life is mine doubly. I am only claiming my own, Meg."

"Ah!" she said, and turned towards him with an air of submission. "I refused you because I thought it was right. Will you tell me it is not?"

"I tell you it is not, my sweet. If you did not marry me no other woman would ever take your

place. I should be the last Fitzmaurice. No other woman would ever be the mother of my children. We have a way of being faithful to death. Look at Uncle Toby!"

Her eyes showed that his passionate assurance had shaken her.

"I believe you," she said slowly. "With you it is for ever."

"It is for ever. Then come to me, my one love."

"What have I to bring you?" she asked trembling.

"Your lovely self, and"—remembering her pride—"the traditions of a great old name."

"The glories of the O'Donoghues are long over. There is only shadow in our later years."

"There is neither spot nor stain in you, my Meg."

"Ah, Gervase, am I worth it?"

"Worth a world well lost. I would give everything for you, Meg, except honour and the right. But, like Lovelace, I love you and honour together. Come to me, Meg, the Hand beckons you!"

"Then I come."

* * * * *

An hour later Mrs. O'Donoghue, entering with the Counsellor, full of gratitude and praises, found

Captain Fitzmaurice still sitting by her daughter's sofa.

"And the little feet," said the Counsellor, "shall have golden shoes, if I have to provide them myself."

"Hang them at the new shrine of Sir Maurice's Hand, Uncle Toby," said the Captain, coolly. "She is going to be a working woman all her life, or at least till the bog gives up its gold."

"The bog!" repeated the Counsellor, wondering, while Mrs. O'Donoghue looked from her daughter to Fitzmaurice, as though she thought the latter had suddenly gone mad.

"The Hand has led us together," the Captain said. "And, Uncle Toby, you may as well fit up the shrine in the Dower House, for I have made up my mind to let Killylea."

"Ah, my boy!"

"Don't be sorry, Uncle Toby; Meg is worth it. With Meg and the Hand, it would be home anywhere."

The Counsellor stooped and kissed Meg's cheek with courtly grace.

"You are welcome into the family, my very dear niece," he said. "It has never received a daughter more beautiful."

"Nor more worthy," said the Captain. "You won't refuse your consent, Mrs. O'Donoghue?"

"You don't seem to have waited for it, Captain. And, sure, I'm the proud woman."

"I've been waiting over-long for an even more important one, Mrs. O'Donoghue."

"You don't mean to say she refused you too. And to think that you must let Killylea!"

"Till the bog gives up its gold. We are going to be farmers together. Meg the gardener, and I the farmer. You will have the wish of your heart, Mrs. O'Donoghue. Meg will go no more to fairs; she will grow fruit and flowers on the little farmstead belonging to the Dower House."

"'Twill be a little place for you, after Killylea, Captain dear!"

"Meg will be there."

"Upon my word," said the Counsellor, rubbing his hands softly, "it seems quite an ideal arrangement."

"And to think," said Mrs. O'Donoghue, "that I wanted Meg to marry the little French gentleman. But sure he wasn't a patch on the Captain."

EPILOGUE.

FOR the first time in its existence a nursery had been fitted up and occupied in the Dower House of Killylea.

It was a matter of regret to Captain Fitzmaurice that his heir should be born and grow within any walls save those of the Castle, but he comforted himself with the thought that Killylea would have redeemed itself long before young Maurice's majority. The heir's coming of age would take place at home.

When he said it Meg's eyes reproached him silently.

"Ah, I know," he said, "I am an ungrateful fellow to grumble, and home is anywhere where you are, my dearest, and where the Hand is, and the child."

"Yes; and no millionaire could be pleasanter than our tenant. Confess, Gervase, that life has been gayer since Sir Joseph Fry has inhabited Killylea."

"Oh, Fry's a thoroughly good sort. And of course one does have a bit of society. I'm a happier man since you made me your own, Meg, and more inclined for sociability. We'll have to start a town house when we turn out Sir Joseph from Killylea."

"Or induce Mrs. Roger to live here. It would be almost as amusing and even more pleasant."

They were at breakfast, and Clare made a third at the table; Clare come back for country air, having worn her strength thin in her London slum.

"What a budget!" said Captain Fitzmaurice, tossing his wife a thick packet across the breakfast table.

"It is from Germaine. She ought to have belonged to the great age of letter-writing. She tells me so much of my godson, and will ask so much of hers."

With sparkling eyes she slit open the thin envelope. The passage of time had not made the old friendship fade, nor the forming of closer ties, which often, in the case of women, absorbs the capacity for friendship,

Suddenly Meg uttered a cry of surprise over her letter.

"What is it, Meg?" her husband asked.

"Paul is to marry Victorine in the spring. Oh, how glad I am!"

"And I too. I hope the fellow will be happy; he deserves it!"

"I was very fond of him," said Clare. "I used to wish for you to marry him, Meg—ignorantly, of

course. He was so fond of you, Meg. Of course it is the French way—this marriage of his, but I cannot be glad with you and Gervase that he takes it. He seemed to me too good for a marriage of convenience."

"A marriage of convenience," repeated Meg. "Ah, Clare, my dear, even you can be guilty of rash judgment."

"But is it not so? A little while ago he was in love with you. Or is it that he is fickle?"

"I don't think that he is fickle. And some people might call it a marriage of convenience; I call it by a nobler name."

"He's too good a fellow anyhow," said the Captain, "not to make his wife happy, too good to refuse to be made happy by her."

"Yet, after all," repeated Clare, with gentle obstinacy, "if he marries this young cousin with a great dowry, when he was in despair over some one else a couple of years ago, it seems to me that it must be a marriage of convenience."

"I dare say a considerable number of people will be of your opinion, Clare," said Captain Fitzmaurice.

THE END.

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